THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES
THE LIBRARY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES

WITCHING HILL

"You won't improve his chances by keeping anything back."

Page 57.

WITCHING HILL

BY

E. W. HORNUNG

AUTHOR OF "RAFFLES"

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

Reprinted, 1914.

PR
6015
H784U
1914

CONTENTS

	PAGE
UNHALLOWED GROUND	7
THE HOUSE WITH RED BLINDS	47
A VICIOUS CIRCLE	91
THE LOCAL COLOUR	126
THE ANGEL OF LIFE	165
UNDER ARMS	199
THE LOCKED ROOM	237
THE TEMPLE OF BACCHUS	280

1673037

CHAPTER I

Unhallowed Ground

The Witching Hill Estate Office was as new as the Queen Anne houses it had to let, and about as worthy of its name. It was just a wooden box with a veneer of rough-cast and a corrugated iron lid. Inside there was a vast of varnish on three of the walls; but the one opposite my counter consisted of plate-glass worth the rest of the structure put together. It afforded a fine prospect of Witching Hill Road, from the level crossing by the station to the second lamp-post round the curve.

Framed and glazed in the great window, this was not a picture calculated to inspire a very young man; and yet there was little to distract a brooding eye from its raw

grass-plots and crude red bricks and tiles; for one's chief duties were making out orders to view the still empty houses, hearing the complaints of established tenants, and keeping such an eye on painters and paper-hangers as was compatible with "being on the spot if anybody called." An elderly or a delicate man would have found it nice light work; but for a hulking youth fresh from the breeziest school in Great Britain, where they live in flannels and only work when it is wet or dark, the post seemed death in life. My one consolation was to watch the tenants hurrying to the same train every morning, in the same silk hat and blacks, and crawling home with the same evening paper every night. I at any rate enjoyed comparatively pure air all day. I had not married and settled down in a pretentious jerry-building where nothing interesting could possibly happen, and nothing worth doing be ever done. For that was one's first feeling about the Witching Hill Estate; it was a place for crabbed age and drab respectability, and a black coat every day of the week. Then young Uvo Delavoye dropped into the office

from another hemisphere, in the white ducks and helmet of the tropics. And life began again.

"Are you the new clerk to the Estate?" he asked if he might ask, and I prepared myself for the usual grievance. I said I was, and he gave me his name in exchange for mine, with his number in Mulcaster Park, which was all but a continuation of Witching Hill Road. "There's an absolute hole in our lawn," he complained—"and I'd just marked out a court. I do wish you could come and have a look at it."

There was room for a full-size lawn-tennis court behind every house on the Estate. That was one of our advertised attractions. But it was not our business to keep the courts in order, and I rather itched to say so.

"It's early days," I ventured to suggest; "there's sure to be holes at first, and I'm afraid there'll be nothing for it but just to fill them in."

"Fill them in!" cried the other young man, getting quite excited. "You don't know what a hole this is; it would take a ton of earth to fill it in."

"You're not serious, Mr. Delavoye."

"Well, it would take a couple of barrow-loads. It's a regular depression in the ground, and the funny thing is that it's come almost while my back was turned. I finished marking out the court last night, and this morning there's this huge hole bang in the middle of one of my side-lines! If you filled it full of water it would take you over the ankles."

"Is the grass not broken at the edges?"

"Not a bit of it; the whole thing might have been done for years."

"And what like is this hole in shape?"

Delavoye met me eye to eye. "Well, I can only say I've seen the same sort of thing in a village churchyard, and nowhere else," he said. "It's like a churchyard starting to yawn!" he suddenly added, and looked in better humour for the phrase.

I pulled out my watch. "I'll come at one, when I knock off in any case, if you can wait till then."

"Rather!" he cried quite heartily; "and I'll wait here if you don't mind, Mr. Gillon. I've just seen my mother and sister off to

town, so it fits in rather well. I don't want them to know if it's anything beastly. May we smoke in here? Then have one of mine."

And he perched himself on my counter, lighting the whole place up with his white suit and animated air; for he was a very pleasant fellow from the moment he appeared to find me one. Not much my senior, he had none of my rude health and strength, but was drawn and yellowed by some tropical trouble (as I rightly guessed) which had left but little of his outer youth beyond a vivid eye and tongue. Yet I would fain have added these to my own animal advantages. It is difficult to recapture a first impression; but I think I felt, from the beginning, that those twinkling, sunken eyes looked on me and all things in a light of their own.

"Not an interesting place?" cried young Delavoye, in astonishment at a chance remark of mine. "Why, it's one of the most interesting in England! None of these fine old crusted country houses are half so fascinating to me as the ones quite near London. Think of the varied life they've seen, the

bucks and bloods galore, the powder and patches, the orgies begun in town and finished out here, the highwaymen waiting for 'em on Turnham Green! Of course you know about the heinous Lord Mulcaster who owned this place in the high old days? He committed every crime in the Newgate Calendar, and now I'm just wondering whether you and I aren't by way of bringing a fresh one home to him."

I remember feeling sorry he should talk like that, though it argued a type of mind that rather reconciled me to my own. I was never one to jump to gimcrack conclusions, and I said as much with perhaps more candour than the occasion required. The statement was taken in such good part, however, that I could not but own I had never even heard the name of Mulcaster until the last few days, whereas Delavoye seemed to know all about the family. Thereupon he told me he was really connected with them, though not at all closely with the present peer. It had nothing to do with his living on an Estate which had changed hands before it was broken up. But I

modified my remark about the ancestral acres—and made a worse.

"I wasn't thinking of the place," I explained, "as it used to be before half of it was built over. I was only thinking of that half and its inhabitants—I mean—that is—the people who go up and down in top-hats and frock-coats!"

And I was left clinging with both eyes to my companion's cool attire.

"But that's my very point," he laughed and said. "These City fellows are the absolute salt of historic earth like this; they throw one back into the good old days by sheer force of contrast. I never see them in their office kit without thinking of that old rascal in his wig and ruffles, carrying a rapier instead of an umbrella; he'd have fallen on it like Brutus if he could have seen his grounds plastered with cheap red bricks and mortar, and crawling with Stock Exchange ants!"

"You've got an imagination," said I, chuckling. I nearly told him he had the gift of the gab as well.

"You must have something," he returned

a little grimly, "when you're stuck on the shelf at my age. Besides, it isn't all imagination, and you needn't go back a hundred years for your romance. There's any amount kicking about this Estate at the present moment; it's in the soil. These business blokes are not all the dull dogs they look. There's a man up our road—but he can wait. The first mystery to solve is the one that's crying from our back garden."

I liked his way of putting things. It made one forget his yellow face, and the broken career that his looks and hints suggested, or it made one remember them and think the more of him. But the things themselves were interesting, and Witching Hill had more possibilities when we sallied forth together at one o'clock.

It was the height of such a June as the old century could produce up to the last. The bald red houses, too young to show a shoot of creeper, or a mellow tone from door-step to chimney-pot, glowed like clowns' pokers in the ruthless sun. The shade of some stately elms, on a bit of old road between the two new ones of the Estate, appealed

sharply to my awakened sense of contrast. It was all familiar ground to me, of course, but I had been over it hitherto with my eyes on nothing else and my heart in the Lowlands. Now I found myself wondering what the elms had seen in their day, and what might not be going on in the red houses even now.

"I hope you know the proper name of our road," said Delavoye as we turned into it. "It's Mulcaster Park, as you see, and not Mulcaster Park Road, as it was when we came here in the spring. Our neighbours have risen in a body against the superfluous monosyllable, and it's been painted out for ever."

In spite of that precaution Mulcaster Park was still suspiciously like a road. It was very long and straight, and the desired illusion had not been promoted by the great names emblazoned on some of the little wooden gates. Thus there was Longleat, which had just been let for £70 on a three-year tenancy, and Chatsworth with a C. P. card in the drawing-room window. Plain No. 7, the Delavoyes' house, was near

the far end on the left-hand side, which had the advantage of a strip of unspoilt woodland close behind the back gardens ; and just through the wood was Witching Hill House, scene of immemorial excesses, according to this descendant of the soil.

"But now it's in very different hands," he remarked as we reached our destination. "Sir Christopher Stainsby is apparently all that my ignoble kinsman was not. They say he's no end of a saint. In winter we see his holy fane from our back windows."

It was not visible through the giant hedge of horse-chestnuts now heavily overhanging the split fence at the bottom of the garden. I had come out through the dining-room with a fresh sense of interest in these Delavoyes. Their furniture was at once too massive and too good for the house. It stood for some old home of very different type. Large oil-paintings and marble statuettes had not been acquired to receive the light of day through windows whose upper sashes were filled with cheap stained glass. A tigerskin with a man-eating head, over which I tripped, had not always been in the

way before a cast-iron mantelpiece. I felt sorry, for the moment, that Mrs. and Miss Delavoye were not at home; but I was not so sorry when I beheld the hole in the lawn behind the house.

It had the ugly shape and appearance which had reminded young Delavoye himself of a churchyard. I was bound to admit its likeness to some sunken grave, and the white line bisecting it was not the only evidence that the subsidence was of recent occurrence; the grass was newly mown and as short inside the hole as it was all over. No machine could have made such a job of such a surface, said the son of the house, with a light in his eyes, but a drop in his voice, which made me wonder whether he desired or feared the worst.

"What do you want us to do, Mr. Delavoye?" I inquired in my official capacity.

"I want it dug up, if I can have it done now, while my mother's out of the way."

That was all very well, but I had only limited powers. My instructions were to attend promptly to the petty wants of tenants, but to refer any matter of importance

to our Mr. Muskett, who lived on the Estate but spent his days at the London office. This appeared to me that kind of matter, and little as I might like my place I could ill afford to risk it by doing the wrong thing. I put all this as well as I could to my new friend, but not without chafing his impetuous spirit.

"Then I'll do the thing myself!" said he, and fetched from the yard some garden implements which struck me as further relics of more spacious days. In his absence I had come to the same conclusion about a couple of high-backed Dutch garden chairs and an umbrella tent; and the final bond of fallen fortunes made me all the sorrier to have put him out. He was not strong; no wonder he was irritable. He threw himself into his task with a kind of feeble fury; it was more than I could stand by and watch. He had not turned many sods when he paused to wipe his forehead, and I seized the spade.

"If one of us is going to do this job," I cried, "it shan't be the one who's unfit for it. You can take the responsibility, if you

like, but that's all you do between now and two o'clock!"

I should date our actual friendship from that moment. There was some boyish bluster on his part, and on mine a dour display which he eventually countenanced on my promising to stay to lunch. Already the sweat was teeming off my face, but my ankles were buried in rich brown mould. A few days before there had been a thunder-storm accompanied by tropical rain, which had left the earth so moist underneath that one's muscles were not taxed as much as one's skin. And I was really very glad of the exercise, after the physical stagnation of office life.

Not that Delavoye left everything to me; he shifted the Dutch chairs and the umbrella tent so as to screen my operations alike from the backyard behind us and from the windows of the occupied house next door. Then he hovered over me, with protests and apologies, until the noble inspiration took him to inquire if I liked beer. I stood upright in my pit, and my mouth must have watered as visibly as the rest of my countenance.

It appeared he was not allowed to touch it himself, but he would fetch some in a jug from the Mulcaster Arms, and blow the wives of the gentlemen who went to town!

I could no more dissuade him from this share of the proceedings than he had been able to restrain me from mine; perhaps I did not try very hard; but I did redouble my exertions when he was gone, burying my spade with the enthusiasm of a gold-digger working a rich claim, and yet depositing each spadeful with some care under cover of the chairs. And I had hardly been a minute by myself when I struck indubitable wood at the depth of three or four feet. Decayed wood it was, too, which the first thrust of the spade crushed in; and at that I must say the perspiration cooled upon my skin. But I stood up and was a little comforted by the gay blue sky and the bottle-green horse-chestnuts, if I looked rather longer at the French window through which Delavoye had disappeared.

His wild idea had seemed to me the unwholesome fruit of a morbid imagination, but now I prepared to find it hateful fact.

Down I went on my haunches, and groped with my hands in the mould, to learn the worst with least delay. The spade I had left sticking in the rotten wood, and now I ran reluctant fingers down its cold iron into the earth-warm splinters. They were at the extreme edge of the shaft that I was sinking, but I discovered more splinters at the same level on the opposite side. These were not of my making; neither were they part of any coffin, but rather of some buried floor or staging. My heart danced as I seized the spade again. I dug another foot quickly; that brought me to detached pieces of rotten wood of the same thickness as the jagged edges above; evidently a flooring of some kind had fallen in—but fallen upon what? Once more the spade struck wood, but sound wood this time. The last foot of earth was soon taken out, and an oblong trap-door disclosed, with a rusty ring-bolt at one end.

I tugged at the ring-bolt without stopping to think; but the trap-door would not budge. Then I got out of the hole for a pickaxe that Delavoye had produced with the spade, and

with one point of the pick through the ring I was able to get a little leverage. It was more difficult to insert the spade where the old timbers had started, while still keeping them apart, but this once done I could ply both implements together. There was no key-hole to the trap, only the time-eaten ring and a pair of hinges like prison bars; it could but be bolted underneath; and yet how those old bolts and that wood of ages clung together! It was only by getting the pick into the gap made by the spade, and prizing with each in turn and both at once, that I eventually achieved my purpose. I heard the bolt tinkle on hard ground beneath, and next moment saw it lying at the bottom of a round bricked hole.

All this must have occupied far fewer minutes than it has taken to describe; for Delavoye had not returned to peer with me into a well which could never have been meant for water. It had neither the width nor the depth of ordinary wells; an old ladder stood against one side, and on the other the high sun shone clean down into the mouth of a palpable tunnel. It opened in

the direction of the horse-chestnuts, and I was in it next moment. The air was intolerably stale without being actually foul; a match burnt well enough to reveal a horse-shoe passage down which a man of medium stature might have walked upright. It was bricked like the well, and spattered with some repulsive growth that gave me a clammy daub before I realised the dimensions. I had struck a second match on my trousers, and it had gone out as if by magic, when Delavoye hailed me in high excitement from the lawn above.

He was less excited than I expected on hearing my experience; and he only joined me for a minute before luncheon, which he insisted on our still taking, to keep the servants in the dark. But it was a very brilliant eye that he kept upon the Dutch chairs through the open window, and he was full enough of plans and explanations. Of course we must explore the passage, but we would give the bad air a chance of getting out first. He spoke of some Turkish summer-house, or pavilion, mentioned in certain annals of Witching Hill. that he had

skimmed for his amusement in the local Free Library. There was no such structure to be seen from any point of vantage that he had discovered; possibly this was its site; and the floor which had fallen in might have been a false basement, purposely intended to conceal the trap-door, or else built over it by some unworthy successor of the great gay lord.

"He was just the sort of old sportsman to have a way of his own out of the house, Gillon! He might have wanted it at any moment; he must have been ready for the worst most nights of his life; for I may tell you they would have hanged him in the end if he hadn't been too quick for them with his own horse-pistol. You didn't know he was as bad as that? It's not a thing the family boasts about, and I don't suppose your Estate people would hold it out as an attraction. But I've read a thing or two about the bright old boy, and I do believe we've struck the site of some of his brightest moments!"

"I should like to have explored that tunnel."

"So you shall."

"But when?"

We had gobbled our luncheon, and I had drained the jug that my unconventional host had carried all the way from the Mulcaster Arms; but already I was late for a most unlucky appointment with prospective tenants, and it was only a last look that I could take at my not ignoble handiwork. It was really rather a good hole for a beginner, and a grave-digger could not have heaped his earth much more compactly. It came hard to leave the next stage of the adventure even to as nice a fellow as young Delavoye.

"When?" he repeated with an air of surprise. "Why to-night, of course; you don't suppose I'm going to explore it without you, do you?"

I had already promised not to mention the matter to my Mr. Muskett when he looked in at the office on his way from the station; but that was the only undertaking which had passed between us.

"I thought you said you didn't want Mrs. Delavoye to see the pit's mouth?"

It was his own expression, yet it made him smile, though it had not made me.

"I certainly don't mean either my mother or sister to see one end till we've seen the other," said he. "They might have a word too many to say about it. I must cover the place up somehow before they get back; but I'll tell them you're coming in this evening, and when they go aloft we shall very naturally come out here for a final pipe."

"Armed with a lantern?"

"No, a pocketful of candles. And don't you dress, Gillon, because I don't, even when I'm not bound for the bowels of the globe."

I ran to my appointment after that; but the prospective tenants broke theirs, and kept me waiting for nothing all that fiery afternoon. I can shut my eyes and go through it all again, and see every inch of my sticky little prison near the station. In the heat its copious varnish developed an adhesive quality as fatal to flies as bird-lime, and there they stuck in death to pay me out. It was not necessary to pin any notice to the walls; one merely laid them on the varnish; and that morning, when

young Delavoye had leant against it in his whites, he had to peel himself off like a plaster. That morning! It seemed days ago, not because I had met with any great adventure yet, but the whole atmosphere of the place was changed by the discovery of a kindred spirit. Not that we were naturally akin in temperament, tastes, or anything else but our common youth and the want in each of a companion approaching his own type. We saw things at a different angle, and when he smiled I often wondered why. We might have met in town or at college and never sought each other again; but separate adversities had driven us both into the same dull haven—one from the Eygptian Civil, which had nearly been the death of him; the other on a sanguine voyage (before the mast) from the best school in Scotland to Land Agency. We were bound to make the most of each other, and I for one looked forward to renewing our acquaintance even more than to the sequel of our interrupted adventure.

But I was by no means anxious to meet my new friend's womankind; never anything

of a lady's man, I was inclined rather to resent the existence of these good ladies, partly from something he had said about them with reference to our impending enterprise. Consequently it was rather late in the evening when I turned out of one of the nominally empty houses, where I had gone to lodge with a still humbler servant of the Estate, and went down to No. 7 with some hope that its mistress at all events might already have retired. Almost to my horror I learned that they were all three in the back garden, whither I was again conducted through the little dining-room with the massive furniture.

Mrs. Delavoye was a fragile woman with a kind but nervous manner; the daughter put me more at my ease, but I could scarcely see either of them by the dim light from the French window outside which they sat. I was more eager, however, to see "the pit's mouth," and in the soft starlight of a velvet night I made out the two Dutch chairs lying face downward over the shaft.

"It's so tiresome of my brother," said Miss Delavoye, following my glance with

disconcerting celerity: "just when we want our garden chairs he's varnished them, and there they lie unfit to use!"

I never had any difficulty in looking stolid, but for the moment I avoided the impostor's eyes. It was trying enough to hear his impudent defence.

"You've been at me about them all the summer, Amy, and I felt we were in for a spell of real hot weather at last."

"I can't think why you've put them out there, Uvo," remarked his mother. "They won't dry any better in the dew, my dear boy."

"They won't make a hopeless mess of the grass, at all events!" he retorted. "But why varnish our dirty chairs in public? Mr. Gillon won't be edified; he'd much rather listen to the nightingale, I'm sure."

Had they a nightingale? I had never heard one in my life. I was obliged to say something, and this happened to be the truth; it led to a little interchange about Scotland, in which the man Uvo assumed a Johnsonian pose, as though he had known me as long as I felt I had known him, and

then prayed silence for the nightingale as if the suburban garden were a banqueting hall. It was a concert hall, at any rate, and never was sweeter solo than the invisible singer poured forth from the black and jagged wood between glimmering lawn and starry sky. I see the picture now, with the seated ladies dimly silhouetted against the French windows, and our two cigarettes waxing and waning like revolving lights seen leagues away. I hear the deep magic of those heavenly notes, as I was to hear them more summers than one from that wild wood within a few yards of our raw red bricks and mortar. It may be as the prelude of what was to follow that I recall it all so clearly, down to the couplet that Uvo could not quite remember and his sister did:

> "The voice I hear this passing night was heard
> In ancient days by emperor and clown."

"That's what I meant!" he cried. "By emperor, clown, and old man Mulcaster in his cups! Think of him carrying on in there to such a tune, and think of pious Christopher holding family prayers to it now!"

And the bare thought dashed from my lips a magic potion compounded of milky lawn and ebony horse-chestnuts, of an amethyst sky twinkling with precious stars, and the low voice of a girl trying not to drown the one in the wood; the spell was broken, and I was glad when at last we had the garden to ourselves.

"There are two things I must tell you for your comfort," said the incorrigible Uvo as we lifted one Dutch chair from the hole it covered like a hatchway, but left the other pressed down over the heap of earth. "In the first place, both my mother and sister have front rooms, so they won't hear or bother about us again. The other thing's only that I've been back to the Free Library in what the simple inhabitants still insist on calling the Village, and had another look into those annals of old Witching Hill. I can find no mention whatever of any subterranean passage. I shouldn't wonder if good Sir Chris had never heard of it in his life. In that case we shall rush in where neither man nor beast has trodden for a hundred and fifty years."

We lit our candles down the shaft, and then I drew the Dutch chair over the hole again on Delavoye's suggestion; he was certainly full of resource, and I was only too glad to play the practical man with my reach and strength. If he had been less impetuous and headstrong, we should have made a strong pair of adventurers. In the tunnel he would go first, for instance, much against my wish; but, as he put it, if the foul air knocked him down I could carry him out under one arm, whereas he would have to leave me to die in my tracks. So he chattered as we crept on and on, flinging monstrous shadows into the arch behind us, and lighting up every patch of filth ahead; for the long-drawn vault was bearded with stalactites of crusted slime; but no living creature fled before us; we alone breathed the impure air, encouraged by our candles, which lit us far beyond the place where my match had been extinguished and deeper and deeper yet without a flicker.

Then in the same second they both went out, at a point where the overhead excrescences made it difficult to stand upright.

And there we were, like motes in a tube of lamp-black; for it was a darkness as palpable as fog. But my leader had a reassuring explanation on the tip of his sanguine tongue.

"It's because we stooped down," said he. "Strike a match on the roof if it's dry enough. There! What did I tell you? The dregs of the air settle down like other dregs. Hold on a bit! I believe we're under the house, and that's why the arch is dry."

We continued our advance with instinctive stealth, now blackening the roof with our candles as we went, and soon and sure enough the old tube ended in a wad of brick and timber.

In the brickwork was a recessed square, shrouded in cobwebs which perished at a sweep of Delavoye's candle; a wooden shutter closed the aperture, and I had just a glimpse of an oval knob, green with verdigris, when my companion gave it a twist and the shutter sprang open at the base. I held it up while he crept through with his candle, and then I followed him with mine into the queerest chamber I had ever seen.

It was some fifteen feet square, with a rough parquet floor and panelled walls and ceiling. All the woodwork seemed to me old oak, and reflected our naked lights on every side in a way that bespoke attention; and there was a tell-tale set of folding steps under an ominous square in the ceiling, but no visible break in the four walls, nor yet another piece of movable furniture. In one corner, however, stood a great stack of cigar boxes whose agreeable aroma was musk and frankincense after the penetrating humours of the tunnel. This much we had noted when we made our first startling discovery. The panel by which we had entered had shut again behind us; the noise it must have made had escaped us in our excitement; there was nothing to show which panel it had been—no semblance of a knob on this side—and soon we were not even agreed as to the wall.

Uvo Delavoye had enough to say at most moments, but now he was a man of action only, and I copied his proceedings without a word. Panel after panel he rapped and sounded like any doctor, even through his

fingers to make less noise! I took the next wall, and it was I who first detected a hollow note. I whispered my suspicion; he joined me, and was convinced; so there we stood cheek by jowl, each with a guttering candle in one hand, while the other felt the panel and pressed the knots. And a knot it was that yielded under my companion's thumb. But the panel that opened inwards was not our panel at all; instead of our earthy tunnel, we looked into a shallow cupboard, with a little old dirty bundle lying alone in the dust of ages. Delavoye picked it up gingerly, but at once I saw him weighing his handful in surprise, and with one accord we sat down to examine it, sticking our candles on the floor between us in their own grease.

"Lace," muttered Uvo, "and something in it."

The outer folds came to shreds in his fingers; a little deeper the lace grew firmer, and presently he was paying it out to me in fragile hanks. I believe it was a single flounce, though yards in length. Delavoye afterwards looked up the subject, characteristically, and declared it Point de Venise;

from what I can remember of its exquisite workmanship, in monogram, coronet, and imperial emblems, I can believe with him that the diamond buckle to which he came at last was less precious than its wrapping. But by that time we were not thinking of their value; we were screwing up our faces over a dark coagulation which caused the last yard or so to break off in bits.

"Lace and blood and diamonds!" said Delavoye, bending over the relics in grim absorption. "Could the priceless old sinner have left us a more delightful legacy?"

"What are you going to do with them?" I asked rather nervously at that. They had not been left to us. They ought surely to be delivered to their rightful owner.

"But who does own them?" asked Delavoye. "Is it the worthy plutocrat who's bought the show and all that in it is, or is it my own venerable kith and kin? They wouldn't thank us for taking these rather dirty coals to Newcastle. They might refuse delivery, or this old boy might claim his mining rights, and where should we come in then? No, Gillon, I'm sorry to disappoint

you, but as a twig of the old tree I mean to take the law into my own hands"—I held my breath—"and put these things back exactly where we found them. Then we'll leave everything in plumb order, and finish up by filling in that hole in our lawn—if ever we get out of this one."

But small doubt on the point was implied in his buoyant tone; the way through the panel just broached argued a similar catch in the one we sought; meanwhile we closed up the other with much relief on my side and an honest groan from Delavoye. It was sufficiently obvious that Sir Christopher Stainsby had discovered neither the secret subway nor the secret repository which we had penetrated by pure chance; on the other hand, he made use of the chamber leading to both as a cigar cellar, and had it kept in better order than such a purpose required. Sooner or later somebody would touch a spring, and one discovery would lead to another. So we consoled each other as we resumed our search, almost forgetting that we ourselves might be discovered first.

It was in a providential pause, broken only to my ear by our quiet movements, that Delavoye dabbed a quick hand on my candle and doused his own against the wall. Without a whisper he drew me downward, and there we cowered in throbbing darkness, but still not a sound that I could hear outside my skin. Then the floor above opened a lighted mouth with a gilded roof; black legs swung before our noses, found the step-ladder and came running down. The cigars were on the opposite side. The man knew all about them, found the right box without a light, and turned to go running up.

Now he must see us, as we saw him and his smooth, smug, flunkey's face to the whites of its upturned eyes! My fists were clenched —and often I wonder what I meant to do. What I did was to fall forward upon oozing palms as the trap-door was let down with a bang.

"Didn't he see us, Delavoye? Are you sure he didn't?" I chattered as he struck a match.

"Quite. I was watching his eyes—weren't you?"

"Yes—but they got all blurred at the finish."

"Well, pull yourself together; now's our time! It's an empty room overhead; it wasn't half lit up. But we haven't done anything, remember, if they do catch us."

He was on the steps already, but I had no desire to argue with him. I was as ripe for a risk as Delavoye, as anxious to escape after the one we had already run. The trap-door went up slowly, pushing something over it into a kind of tent.

"It's only the rug," purred Delavoye. "I heard him take it up—thank God—as well as put it down again. Now hold the candle; now the trap-door, till I hold it up for you."

And we squirmed up into a vast apartment, not only empty as predicted, but left in darkness made visible by the solitary light we carried now. The little stray flame was mirrored in a floor like black ice, then caught the sheen of the tumbled rug that Delavoye would stay to smooth, then twinkled in the diamond panes of book-cases like church windows, flickered over a high altar of a

mantelpiece, and finally displayed our stealthy selves in the window by which we left the house.

"Thank God!" said Delavoye as he shut it down again. "That's something like a breath of air!"

"Hush!" I whispered with my back to him.

"What is it?"

"I thought I heard shouts of laughter."

"You're right. There they go again! I believe we've struck a heavy entertainment."

In a dell behind the house, a spreading cedar caught the light of windows that we could not see. Delavoye crept to the intermediate angle, turned round, and beckoned in silhouette against the tree.

"High jinks and junketings!" he chuckled when I joined him. "The old bloke must be away. Shall we risk a peep?"

My answer was to lead the way for once, and it was long before we exchanged another syllable. But in a few seconds, and for more minutes, we crouched together at an open window, seeing life with all our innocent eyes.

It was a billiard-room into which we gazed, but it was not being used for billiards. One end of the table was turned into a champagne bar; it bristled with bottles in all stages of depletion, with still an unopened magnum towering over pails of ice, silver dishes of bonbons, cut decanters of wine and spirits. At the other end a cluster of flushed faces hung over a spinning roulette wheel; nearly all young women and men, smoking fiercely in a silver haze, for the moment terribly intent; and as the ball ticked and rattled, the one pale face present, that of the melancholy croupier, showed a dry zest as he intoned the customary admonitions. They were new to me then; now I seem to recognise through the years the Anglo-French of his "*rien ne va plus*" and all the rest. There were notes and gold among the stakes. The old rogue raked in his share without emotion; one of the ladies embraced him for hers; and one had stuck a sprig of maidenhair in his venerable locks; but there he sat, with the deferential dignity of a bygone school, the only very sober member of the party it was his shame to serve.

The din they made before the next spin! It was worse when it died down into plainer speech; playful buffets were exchanged as freely; but one young blood left the table with a deadly dose of raw spirit, and sat glowering over it on a raised settee while the wheel went round again. I did not watch the play; the wild, attentive faces were enough for me; and so it was that I saw a bedizened beauty go mad before my eyes. It was the madness of utter ecstasy—wails of laughter and happy maledictions—and then for that unopened magnum! By the neck she caught it, whirled it about her like an Indian club, then down on the table with all her might and the effect of a veritable shell. A ribbon of blood ran down her dress as she recoiled, and the champagne flooded the green board like bubbling ink; but the old croupier hardly looked up from the pile of notes and gold that he was counting out with his sly, wintry smile.

"You saw she had a fiver on the number? You may watch roulette many a long night without seeing that again!"

It was Delavoye whispering as he dragged

I saw a bedizened beauty go mad before my eyes.
Page 42

me away. He was the cool one now. Too excitable for me in the early stages of our adventure, he was not only the very man for all the rest, but a living lesson in just that thing or two I felt at first I could have taught him. For I fear I should have felled that butler if he had seen us in the cigar cellar, and I know I shouted when the magnum burst; but fortunately so did everybody else except Delavoye and the aged croupier.

"I suppose he was the butler?" I said when we had skirted the shallow drive, avoiding a couple of hansoms that stood there with the cabmen snug inside.

"What! The old fogey? Not he!" cried Delavoye as we reached the road. "I say, don't those hansoms tell us all about his pals!"

"But who was he?"

"The man himself."

"Not Sir Christopher Stainsby?"

"I'm afraid so—the old sinner!"

"But you said he was an old saint?"

"So I thought he was; my lord warden of the Nonconformist conscience, I always heard."

"Then how do you account for it?"

"I can't. I haven't thought about it. Wait a bit!"

He stood still in the road. It was his own road. There was that hole to fill in before morning; meanwhile the sweet night air was sweeter far than we had left it hours ago; and the little new suburban houses surpassed all pleasures and palaces, behind their kindly lamps, with the clean stars watching over them and us.

"I don't want you think the worse of me," said Delavoye, slipping his arm through mine as he led me on: "but at this particular moment I should somehow think less of myself if I didn't tell you, after all we've been through together, that I was really quite severely tempted to take that lace and those diamonds!"

I knew it.

"Well," I said, with the due deliberation of my normal Northern self, "you'd have had a sort of right to them. But that's nothing! Why, man, I was as near as a toucher to laying yon butler dead at our feet!"

"Then we're all three in the same boat, Gillon."

"Which three?"

It was my turn to stand still, outside his house. And now there was excitement enough in his dark face to console me for all mine.

"You, and I, and poor old Sir Christopher."

"Poor old hypocrite! Didn't I hear that his wife died a while ago?"

"Only last year. That makes it sound worse. But in reality it's an excuse, because of course he would fall a victim all the more easily."

"A victim to what?"

"My good Gillon, don't you see that he's up to the very same games on the very same spot as my ignoble kinsman a hundred and fifty years ago? Blood, liquor, and ladies as before! We admit that between us even you and I had the makings of a thief and a murderer while we were under that haunted roof. Don't you believe in influences?"

"Not of that kind," said I heartily. "I never did, and I doubt I never shall."

Delavoye laughed in the starlight, but

his lips were quivering, and his eyes were like stars themselves. But I held up my hand: the nightingale was singing in the wood exactly as when we plunged below the earth. Somehow it brought us together again, and there we stood listening till a clock struck twelve in the distant Village.

"'Tis now the very witching time of night,'" said Uvo Delavoye, "'when churchyards yawn'—like our back garden!" I might have guessed his favourite play, but his face lit up before my memory. "And shall I tell you, Gillon, the real name of this whole infernal Hill and Estate? It's Witching Hill, my man, it's Witching Hill from this night forth!"

And Witching Hill it still remains to me.

CHAPTER II

The House with Red Blinds

Uvo Delavoye had developed a theory to match his name for the Estate. The baleful spirit of the notorious Lord Mulcaster still brooded over Witching Hill, and the innocent occupiers of the Queen Anne houses were one and all liable to the malign influence. Such was the modest proposition, put as fairly as can be expected of one who resisted it from the first; for both by temperament and training I was perhaps unusually proof against this kind of thing. But then I always held that Delavoye himself did not begin by believing in his own idea, that he never thought of it before our subterranean adventure, and would have forgotten all about it but for the house with red blinds.

That vermilion house with the brave blinds of quite another red! I can still see them

bleaching in the glare of those few August days.

It was so hot that the prematurely bronze leaves of the horse-chestnuts, behind the odd numbers in Mulcaster Park, were as crisp as tinfoil, while a tawny stubble defied the garden rollers of those tenants who had not been driven to the real country or the seaside. Half our inhabited houses were either locked up empty, or in the hands of servants who spent their time gossiping at the gate. And I personally was not surprised when the red blinds stayed down in their turn.

The Abercromby Royles were a young couple who might be expected to mobilise at short notice, in spite of the wife's poor health, for they had no other ties. The mere fact of their departure on Bank Holiday, when the rest of the Estate were on the river, meant no more to me than a sudden whim on the lady's part; but then I never liked the looks of her or her very yellow hair, least of all in a bath chair drawn by her indulgent husband after business hours. Mr. Royle was a little solicitor, who himself

flouted tradition with a flower in his coat and a straw hat worn slightly on one side; but with him I had made friends over an escape of gas which he treated as a joke rather than a grievance. He seemed to me just the sort of man to humour his sort of wife, even to the extent of packing off the servants on board wages, as they were said to have done before leaving themselves. Certainly I never thought of a sinister explanation until Uvo Delavoye put one into my head, and then I had no patience with him.

"It's this heat," I declared; "it's hot enough to uproot anybody."

"I wonder," said he, "how many other places they've found too hot for them!"

"But why should you wonder any such rot, when you say yourself that you've never even nodded to Abercromby Royle?"

"Because I've had my eye on him all the same, Gillon, as obvious material for the evil genius of the place."

"I see! I forgot you were spoiling for a second case."

"Case or no case," replied Uvo, "households don't usually disperse at a moment's

notice, and their cook told our butcher that it was only sprung on them this morning. I have it from our own old treasure, if you want to know, so you may take it or leave it at that for what it's worth. But if I had your job, Gilly, and my boss was away, I don't know that I should feel altogether happy about my Michaelmas rent."

Nor was I quite so happy as I had been. I was spending the evening at my friend's, but I cut it rather shorter than I had intended; and on my way to the unlet house in which I lodged, I could not help stopping outside the one with the drawn red blinds. They looked natural enough at this time of night; but all the windows were shut as well; there was no sign of life about the house. And then, as I went my way, I caught a sound which I had just heard as I approached, but not while standing outside the gate. It was the sound of furtive hammering—a few taps and then a pause—but I retraced my steps too quietly to prolong the pause a second time. It was some devil's tattoo on the very door of the empty house, and as I reached up my hand to reply

with the knocker, the door flew open and the devil was Abercromby Royle himself.

He looked one, too, by the light of the lamp opposite, but only for a moment. What impressed me most about our interview, even at the time, was the clemency of my reception by an obviously startled man. He interrupted my apologies to commend my zeal; as for explanations, it was for him to explain to me, if I would be good enough to step inside. I did so with a strange sense of impersonal fear or foreboding, due partly to the stuffy darkness of the hall, partly to a quiver of the kindly hand upon my shoulder. The dining-room, however, was all lit up, and like an oven. Whisky was on the sideboard, and I had to join Mr. Royle in the glass that loosened his tongue.

It was quite true about the servants; they had gone first, and he was the last to leave the ship. The metaphor did not strike me as unfortunate until it was passed off with a hollow laugh. Mr. Royle no longer disguised his nervous worry; he seemed particularly troubled about his wife, who appeared to have followed the servants into the

country, and whom he could not possibly join. He mentioned that he had taken her up to town and seen her off; then, that he was going up again himself by the last train that night; finally—after a pause and between ourselves—that he was sailing immediately for America. When I heard this I thought of Delavoye; but Royle seemed so glad when he had told me, and soon in such a stew about his train, that I felt certain there could be nothing really wrong. It was a sudden call, and a great upset to him; he made no secret of either fact or any of his plans. He had left his baggage that morning at the club where he was going to sleep. He even told me what had brought him back, and that led to an equally voluntary explanation of the hammering I had heard in the road.

"Would you believe it? I'd forgotten all about our letters!" exclaimed Abercromby Royle as we were about to leave the house together. "Having the rest of the day on my hands, I thought I might as well come back myself to give the necessary instructions. But it's no use simply filling up the

usual form; half your correspondence still finds its way into your empty house; so I was just tacking this lid of an old cigar box across the slot. I'll finish it, if you don't mind, and then we can go so far together."

But we went together all the way, and I saw him off in a train laden with Bank Holiday water folk. I thought he scanned them somewhat closely on the platform, and that some of my remarks fell on deaf ears. Among other things, I said I would gladly have kept the empty house aired, had he cared to trust me with his key. It was an office that I had undertaken for more than one of our absentee tenants. But the lawyer's only answer was a grip of the hand as the train began to move. And it seemed to me a haunted face that dissolved into the night, despite the drooping flower in the flannel coat and the hat worn a little on one side.

It would be difficult to define the impression left upon my mind by the whole of this equivocal episode; enough that, for more than one obvious reason, I said not a word about it to Uvo Delavoye. Once or twice I

was tempted by his own remarks about Abercromby Royle, but on each occasion I set my teeth and defended the absent man as though we were both equally in the dark. It seemed a duty, after blundering into his affairs as I had done. But that very week brought forth developments which made a necessary end of all such scruples.

I was interviewing one of our foremen in a house that had to be ready by half-quarter-day, when Delavoye came in with a gleaming eye to tell me I was wanted.

"It's about our friend Royle," he added, trying not to crow. "I was perfectly right. They're on his tracks already!"

"Who are?" I demanded, when we were out of earshot of the men.

"Well, only one fellow so far, but he's breathing blood-hounds and Scotland Yard! It's Coysh, the trick-bicycle inventor; you must know the lunatic by name; but let me tell you that he sounds unpleasantly sane about your limb of the law. A worse case——"

"Where is he?" I interrupted hotly. "And what the devil does he want with me?"

"Thinks you can help him put salt on the bird that's flown, as sort of clerk to the whole aviary! I found him pounding at your office door. He'd been down to Royle's and found it all shut up, of course—like his office in town, he says! Put that in your pipe and smoke it, Gilly! It's a clear case, I'm afraid, but you'd better have it from the fountain-head. I said I thought I could unearth you, and he's waiting outside for you now."

I looked through a window with a scroll of whitewash on the pane. In the road a thick-set man was fanning his big head with a wide soft hat, which I could not but notice that he wore with a morning coat and brown boots. The now eminent engineer is not much more conventional than the hot-headed patentee who in those days had still to find himself (and had lately been looking in the wrong place, with a howling Press at his heels). But even then the quality of the man outshone the eccentricities of the super-crank. And I had a taste of it that August morning; a foretaste, when I looked into the road and saw worry and distress

where I expected only righteous indignation.

I went down and asked him in, and his face lit up like a stormy sunbeam. But the most level-headed man in England could not have come to the point in fewer words or a more temperate tone.

"I'm glad your friend has told you what I've come about. I'm a plain speaker, Mr. Gillon, and I shall be plainer with you than I've been with him, because he tells me you know Abercromby Royle. In that case you won't start a scandal—because to know the fellow is to like him—and I only hope it may prove in your power to prevent one."

"I'll do anything I can, Mr. Coysh," I went so far as to say. But I was already taken by surprise. And so, I could see, was Uvo Delavoye.

"I'll hold you to that," said Coysh frankly. "When did you see him last, Mr. Gillon?"

"Do you mean Mr. Royle?" I stammered, turning away from Delavoye. If only he had not been there!

"Of course I do; and let me tell you, Mr. Gillon, this is a serious matter for the man,

you know. You won't improve his chances by keeping anything back. When did you see him last ? "

" Monday night," I mumbled.

But Delavoye heard.

" Monday *night ?* " he interjected densely. " Why, it was on Monday he went away ! "

" Exactly—by the last train."

" But we heard they'd gone hours before ! "

" We heard wrong, so far as Royle was concerned. I came across him after I left you, and I saw him off myself."

Coysh had a sharp eye on both of us, and Delavoye's astonishment was not lost upon him. But it was at me that he looked last and longest.

" And you keep this to yourself from Monday night till now ? "

" What's about it ? " I demanded, falling into my own vernacular in my embarrassment.

" It only looks rather as though you were behind the scenes," replied Coysh simply. And his honesty called to mine.

" Well, so I was, to a certain extent," I cried ; " but I got there by accident, I

blundered in where I wasn't wanted, and yet the fellow treated me like a gentleman! That's why I never gave it away. But," I added with more guile, "there was really nothing to give away." And with that I improvised a garbled version of my last little visit to the house with red blinds, which I did not say I had discovered in utter darkness, any more than I described the sound which had attracted my attention, or the state of the householder's nerves.

"Very good," said Coysh, making notes on an envelope. "And then you saw him off by the last train: did he say where he was going at that time of night?"

"To sleep at some club, I understood."

"And next morning?"

But I was sorry I had gone so far.

"Mr. Coysh," I said, "I'm here to let the houses on this Estate, and to look after odd jobs for the people who take them. It's not my business to keep an eye on the tenants themselves, still less to report their movements, and I must respectfully decline to say another word about Mr. Abercromby Royle."

The engineer put away his envelope with a shrug.

"Oh, very well; then you force me to go into details which I on my side would vastly prefer to keep to myself; but if you are sincere you will treat them as even more confidential than your own relations with Mr. Royle. You say you are hardly friends. I shall believe it if you stick to your present attitude when you've heard my story. Royle and I, however, have been only too friendly in the past, and I should not forget it even now—if I could find him."

He made a meaning pause, of which I did not avail myself, though Delavoye encouraged me with an eager eye.

"He was not only my solicitor," continued Coysh; "he has acted as my agent in a good many matters which neither lawyers nor patent agents will generally undertake. You've heard of my Mainspring bicycle, of course? It was in his hands, and would have paid him well when it comes off, which is only a question of time." His broad face lit with irrelevant enthusiasm and glowed upon us each in turn. "When you think that by

the very act of pedalling on the level we might be winding up—but there! It's going to revolutionise the most popular pastime of the day, and make my fortune incidentally; but meanwhile I've one or two pot-boilers that bring me in a living wage in royalties. One's an appliance they use in every gold-mine in South Africa. It was taken up by the biggest people in Johannesburg, and of course I've done very well out of it, this last year or two; but ever since Christmas my little bit has been getting more and more overdue. Royle had the whole thing in hand. I spoke to him about it more than once. At last I told him that if he couldn't cope with our paymasters out there, I'd have a go at them myself; but what I really feared was that he was keeping the remittances back, never for a moment that he was tampering with each one as it came. That, however, is what has been going on all this year. I have the certified accounts to prove it, and Royle must have bolted just when he knew the mail would reach me where I've been abroad. I don't wonder, either; he's been faking every statement for the last six months!"

"But not before?" cried Delavoye, as though it mattered.

Coysh turned to him with puzzled eyes.

"No; that's the funny part of it," said he. "You'd think a man who went so wrong—hundreds, in these few months—could never have been quite straight. But not a bit of it. I've got the accounts; they were as right as rain till this last spring."

"I knew it!" exclaimed Delavoye in wild excitement.

"May I ask what you knew?"

Coysh was staring, as well he might.

"Only that the whole mischief must have happened since these people came here to live!"

"Do you suggest that they've been living beyond their means?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Delavoye, as readily as though nothing else had been in his mind.

"Well, and I should say you were right," rejoined the engineer, "if it wasn't for the funniest part of all. When a straight man goes off the rails, there's generally some tremendous cause; but one of the surprises

of this case, as my banker has managed to ascertain, is that Abercromby Royle is in a position to repay every penny. He has more than enough to do it, lying idle in his bank; so there was no apparent motive for the crime, and I for my part am prepared to treat it as a sudden aberration."

"Exactly!" cried Delavoye, as though he were the missing man's oldest friend and more eager than either of us to find excuses for him.

"Otherwise," continued Coysh, "I wouldn't have taken you gentlemen into my confidence. But the plain fact is that I'm prepared to condone the felony at my own risk in return for immediate and complete restitution." He turned his attention entirely to me. "Now, Royle can't make good unless you help him by helping me to find him. I won't be hard on him if you do, I promise you! Not a dozen men in England shall ever know. But if I have to hunt for him it'll be with detectives and a warrant, and the fat'll be in the fire for all the world to smell!"

What could I do but give in after that?

I had not promised to keep any secrets, and it was clearly in the runaway's interests to disclose his destination on the conditions laid down. Of his victim's good faith I had not a moment's doubt; it was as patent as his magnanimous compassion for Abercromby Royle. He blamed himself for not looking after his own show; it was unfair to take a poor little pettifogging solicitor and turn him by degrees into one's trusted business man; it was trying him too high altogether. He spoke of the poor wretch as flying from a wrath that existed chiefly in his own imagination, and even for that he blamed himself. It appeared that Coysh had vowed to Royle that he would have no mercy on anybody who was swindling him, no matter who it might be. He had meant it as a veiled warning, but Royle might have known his bark was worse than his bite, and have made a clean breast of the whole thing there and then. If only he had! And yet I believe we all three thought the better of him because he had not.

But it was not too late, thanks to me! I could not reveal the boat or line by which

Royle was travelling, because it had never occurred to me to inquire, but Coysh seemed confident of finding out. His confidence was of the childlike type which is the foible of some strong men. He knew exactly what he was going to do, and it sounded the simplest thing in the world. Royle would be met on the other side by a cable which would bring him to his senses—and by one of Pinkerton's young men who would shadow him until it did. Either he would cable back the uttermost farthing through his bank, or that young man would tap him on the shoulder without more ado. It was delightful to watch a powerful mind clearing wire entanglements of detail in its leap to a picturesque conclusion; and we had further displays for our benefit; for there was no up-train for an hour and more, and that set the inventor off upon his wonderful bicycle, which was to accumulate hill power by getting wound up automatically on the level. Nothing is so foolish as the folly of genius, and I shall never forget that great man's obstinate defence of his one supreme fiasco, or the diagram that he drew on an unpapered

wall while Uvo Delavoye and I attended with insincere solemnity.

But Uvo was no better when we were at last alone. And his craze seemed to me the crazier of the two.

"It's as plain as a pikestaff, my good Gillon! This fellow Royle comes here an honest man, and instantly starts on a career of fraud—for no earthly reason whatsoever!"

"So you want to find him an unearthly one?"

"I don't; it's there—and a worse case than the last. Old Sir Christopher was the only sober man at his own orgy, but my satanic ancestor seems to have made a mighty clean job of this poor brute!"

"I'm not so sure," said I gloomily. "I'm only sure of one thing—that the dead can't lead the living astray—and you'll never convince me that they can."

It was no use arguing, for we were oil and vinegar on this matter, and were beginning to recognise the fact. But I was grateful to Uvo Delavoye for his attitude on another point. I tried to explain why I had never

told him about my last meeting with Abercromby Royle. It was not necessary; there he understood me in a moment; and so it was in almost everything except this one perverse obsession, due in my opinion to a morbid imagination, which in its turn I attributed to the wretched muddle that the Egyptian climate had made of poor Uvo's inner man. While not actually an invalid, there was little hope of his being fit for work of any sort for a year or more; and I remember feeling glad when he told me he had obtained a reader's ticket for the British Museum, but very sorry when I found that his principal object was to pursue his Witching Hill will-o'-the-wisp to an extent impossible in the local library. Indeed, it was no weather for close confinement on even the healthiest intellectual quest. Yet it was on his way home from the museum that Uvo had picked up Coysh outside my office, and that was where he was when Coysh came down again before the week was out.

This time I was in, and sweltering over the schedule of finishings for the house in which he had found me before, when my

glass door darkened and the whole office shook beneath his ominous tread. With his back to the light, the little round man looked perfectly black with rage; and if he did not actually shake his fist in my face, that is the impression that I still retain of his outward attitude.

His words came in a bitter torrent, but their meaning might have been stated in one breath. Royle had not gone to America at all. Neither in his own name nor any other had he booked his passage at the London office of the Tuesday, or either of the Wednesday steamers, nor as yet in any of those sailing on the following Saturday. So Coysh declared, with characteristic conviction, as proof positive that a given being could not possibly have sailed for the United States under any conceivable disguise or alias. He had himself made a round of the said London offices, armed with photographs of Abercromby Royle. That settled the matter. It also branded me in my visitor's blazing eyes as accessory before or after the flight, and the deliberate author of a false scent which had wasted a couple of invaluable days.

It was no use trying to defend myself, and Coysh told me it was none. He had no time to listen to a "jackanapes in office," as he called me to my face. I could not help laughing in his. All he wanted and intended to discover was the whereabouts of Mrs. Royle—the last thing I knew, or had thought about before that moment—but in my indignation I referred him to the post-office. By way of acknowledgment he nearly shivered my glass door behind him.

I mopped my face and awaited Delavoye with little patience, which ran out altogether when he entered with a radiant face, particularly full of his own egregious researches in Bloomsbury.

"I can't do with that rot to-night!" I cried. "Here's this fat little fool going to get on the tracks of Mrs. Royle, and all through me! The woman's an invalid; this may finish her off. If it were the man himself I wouldn't mind. Where the devil do you suppose he is?"

"I'll tell you later," said Uvo Delavoye, without moving a muscle of his mobile face.

"You'll tell me——see here, Delavoye!"

I spluttered. "This is a serious matter to me; if you're going to rot about it I'd rather you cleared out!"

"But I'm not rotting, Gilly," said he in a different tone, yet with a superior twinkle that I never liked. "I never felt less like it in my life. I really have a pretty shrewd idea of my own, but you're such an unbelieving dog that you must give me time before I tell you what it is. I should like first to know rather more about these alleged peculations and this apparent flight, and whether Mrs. Royle's in it all. I'm rather interested in the lady. But if you care to come in for supper you shall hear my views."

Of course I cared. But across the solid mahogany of more spacious days, though we had it to ourselves, we both seemed disinclined to resume the topic. Delavoye had got up some choice remnant of his father's cellar, grotesquely out of keeping with our homely meal, but avowedly in my honour, and it seemed a time to talk about matters on which we were agreed. I was afraid I knew the kind of idea he had described as "shrewd"; what I dreaded was some fresh

application of his ingenious doctrine as to the local quick and dead, and a heated argument in our extravagant cups. And yet I did want to know what was in my companion's mind about the Royles; for my own was no longer free from presentiments for which there was some ground in the facts of the case. But I was not going to start the subject; and Delavoye steadily avoided it until we strolled out afterward (with humble pipes on top of that Madeira!). Then his arm slipped through mine, and it was with one accord that we drifted up the road toward the house with the drawn blinds.

All these days, on my constant perambulations, it had stared me in the face with its shut windows, its dirty step, its idle chimneys. Every morning those odious blinds had greeted me like red eyelids hiding dreadful eyes. And once I had remembered that the very letter-box was set like teeth against the outer world. But this summer evening, as the house came between us and a noble moon, all was so changed and chastened that I thought no evil until Uvo spoke.

"I can't help feeling that there's something wrong!" he exclaimed below his breath.

"If Coysh is not mistaken," I whispered back, "there's something very wrong indeed."

He looked at me as though I had missed the point, and I awaited an impatient intimation of the fact. But there had been something strange about Uvo Delavoye all the evening; he had singularly little to say for himself, and now he was saying it in so low a voice that I insensibly lowered mine, though we had the whole road almost to ourselves.

"You said you found old Royle quite alone the other night?"

"Absolutely—so *he* said."

"You've no reason to doubt it, have you?"

"No reason—none. Still, it did seem odd that he should hang on to the end—the master of the house—without a soul to do anything for him."

"I quite agree with you," said Delavoye emphatically. "It's very odd. It means something. I believe I know what, too!"

But he did not appear disposed to tell me,

and I was not going to press him on the point. Nor did I share his confidence in his own powers of divination. What could he know of the case, that was unknown to me—unless he had some outside source of information all the time ?

That, however, I did not believe ; at any rate he seemed bent upon acquiring more. He pushed the gate open, and was on the doorstep before I could say a word. I had to follow in order to remind him that his proceedings might be misunderstood if they were seen.

" Not a bit of it ! " he had the nerve to say as he bent over the tarnished letter-box. " You're with me, Gillon, and isn't it your job to keep an eye on these houses ? "

" Yes, but——"

" What's the matter with this letter-box ? It won't open."

" That's so that letters can't be shot into the empty hall. He nailed it up on purpose before he went. I found him at it."

" And didn't it strike you as an extraordinary thing to do ? " Uvo was standing upright now. " Of course it did, or you'd

have mentioned it to Coysh and me the other day."

It was no use denying the fact.

"What's happening to their letters?" he went on, as though I could know.

"I expect they're being re-directed."

"To the wife?"

"I suppose so."

And my voice sank with my heart, and I felt ashamed, and repeated myself aggressively.

"Exactly!" There was no supposing about Uvo. "The wife at some mysterious address in the country—poor soul!"

"Where are you going now?"

He had dived under the front windows, muttering to himself as much as to me. I caught him up at the high side gate into the back garden.

"Lend me a hand," said Delavoye when he had tried the latch.

"You're not going over?"

"That I am, and it'll be your duty to follow. Or I could let you through. Well—if you won't!"

And in the angle between party-fence and

gate he was struggling manfully when I went to his aid as a lesser evil; in a few seconds we were both in the back garden of the empty house, with the gate still bolted behind us.

"Now, if it were ours," resumed Delavoye when he had taken breath, "I should say the lavatory window was the vulnerable point. Lavatory window, please!"

"But, Delavoye, look here!"

"I'm looking," said he, and we faced each other in the broad moonlight that flooded the already ragged lawn.

"If you think I'm going to let you break into this house, you're very much mistaken."

I had my back to the windows I meant to hold inviolate. No doubt the moon revealed some resolution in my face and bearing, for I meant what I said until Delavoye spoke again.

"Oh, very well! If it's coming to brute force I have no more to say. The police will have to do it, that's all. It's their job, when you come to think of it; but it'll be jolly difficult to get them to take it on, whereas you and I——"

And he turned away with a shrug to point his admirable aposiopesis.

"Man Uvo," I said, catching him by the arm, "what's this job you're jawing about?"

"You know well enough. You're in the whole mystery of these people far deeper than I am. I only want to find the solution."

"And you think you'll find it in their house?"

"I know I should," said Uvo with quiet confidence. "But I don't say it'll be a pleasant find. I shouldn't ask you to come in with me, but merely to accept some responsibility afterwards—to-night, if we're spotted. It will probably involve more kudos in the end. But I don't want to let you in for more than you can stand meanwhile, Gillon."

That was enough for me. I myself led the way back to the windows, angrily enough until he took my arm, and then suddenly more at one with him than I had ever been before. I had seen his set lips in the moonlight, and felt the uncontrollable tremor of the hand upon my sleeve.

It so happened that it was not necessary

to break in after all. I had generally some keys about me and the variety of locks on our back doors was not inexhaustible. It was the scullery door in this case that a happy chance thus enabled me to open. But I was now more determined than Delavoye himself, and would have stuck at no burglarious excess to test his prescience, to say nothing of a secret foreboding which had been forming in my own mind.

To one who went from house to house on the Estate as I did, and knew by heart the five or six plans on which builder and architect had rung the changes, darkness should have been no hindrance to the unwarrantable exploration I was about to conduct. I knew the way through these kitchens, and found it here without a false or noisy step. But in the hall I had to contend with the furniture which makes one interior as different from another as the houses themselves may be alike. The Abercromby Royles had as much furniture as the Delavoyes, only of a different type. It was not massive and unsuitable, but only too dainty and multifarious, no doubt in accordance with the

poor wife's taste. I retained an impression of artful simplicity—an enamelled drain-pipe for the umbrellas—painted tambourines and counterfeit milk-stools—which rather charmed me in those days. But I had certainly forgotten a tall flower-stand outside the kitchen door, and over it went crashing as I set foot in the tessellated hall. I doubt if either of us drew breath for some seconds after the last bit of broken plant-pot lay still upon the tiles. Then I rubbed a match on my trousers, but it did not strike. Uvo had me by the hand before I could do it again.

"Do you want to blow up the house?" he croaked. "Can't you smell it for yourself?"

Then I realised that the breath which I had just drawn was acrid with escaped gas.

"It's that asbestos stove again!" I exclaimed, recalling my first visit to the house.

"Which asbestos stove?"

"It's in the dining-room. It was leaking as far back as June."

"Well, we'd better go in there first and open the window. Stop a bit!"

The dining-room was just opposite the kitchen, and I was on the threshold when he pulled me back to tie my handkerchief across my nose and mouth. I did the same for Delavoye, and thus we crept into the room where I had been induced to drink with Royle on the night he went away.

The full moon made smouldering panels of the French window leading into the garden, but little or no light filtered through the long red blind. Delavoye went round to it on tiptoe, and I still say it was a natural instinct that kept our voices down and our movements stealthy; that any other empty house, where we had no business at dead of night, would have had the same effect upon us. Delavoye speaks differently for himself; and I certainly heard him fumbling unduly for the blind-cord while I went over to the gas-stove. At least I was going when I stumbled against a basket chair, which creaked without yielding to my weight, and creaked again as though some one had stirred in it. I recoiled, panic-stricken, and so stood until the blind flew up. Then the silence was sharply broken by a voice that

I drove Delavoye before me.

Page 79

I can still hear but hardly recognise as my own.

It was Abercromby Royle who was sitting in the moonlight over the escaping stove; and I shall not describe him; but a dead flower still drooped from the lapel of a flannel jacket which the dead man had horribly outgrown.

I drove Delavoye before me through the window he had just opened; it was he who insisted on returning, ostensibly to turn off the gas, and I could not let him go alone. But neither could I face the ghastly occupant of the basket chair; and again it was Uvo Delavoye who was busy disengaging something from the frozen fingers when a loud rat-tat resounded through the house.

It was grim to see how the corpse sat still and let us jump; but Uvo was himself before the knock was repeated.

"You go, Gillon!" he said. "It's only somebody who's heard or seen us. Don't you think we smelt the gas through the letter-box, and wasn't it your duty——"

The second knock cut him short, and I answered it without more ado. The night

constable on the beat, who knew me well by sight, was standing on the doorstep like a man, his right hand on his hip till he had blinded me with his lantern. A grunt of relief assured me of his recognition, while his timely arrival was as promptly explained by an insensate volley in a more familiar voice.

"Don't raise the road, Mr. Coysh!" I implored. "The man you want has been here all the time, and dead for the last five days!"

That was a heavy night for me. If Coysh could have made it something worse, I think just at first he would; for he had been grossly deceived, and I had unwittingly promoted the deception. But his good sense and heart had brought him to reason before I accompanied the policeman to the station, leaving the other two on guard over a house as hermetically sealed as Delavoye and I had found it.

At the police station I was stiffly examined by the superintendent; but the explanations that I now felt justified in giving, at Delavoye's instigation, were received without

demur and I was permitted to depart in outward peace. Inwardly I was not so comfortable, for Delavoye had not confined his hints to an excuse for entry, made the more convincing by the evil record of the asbestos stove. We had done some more whispering while the constable was locking up, and the impulsive Coysh had lent himself to our final counsels. The upshot was that I said nothing about my own farewell to Royle, though I dwelt upon my genuine belief that he had actually gone abroad. And I did say I was convinced that the whole affair had been an accident, due to the same loose gas-stove tap which had caused an escape six weeks before.

That was my only actual lie, and on later consideration I began to wonder whether even it was not the truth. This was in Delavoye's sanctum, on the first-floor-back at No. 7, and after midnight; for I had returned to find him in the clutches of excited neighbours, and had waited about till they all deserted him to witness the immediate removal of the remains.

"What is there, after all," I asked, "to

show that it really was a suicide? He might have come back for something he'd forgotten, and kicked against the tap by accident, as somebody did in June. Why make a point of doing the deed at home?"

"Because he didn't want his wife to know."

"But she was bound to know."

"Sooner or later, of course; but the later the better from his point of view, and their own shut-up house was the one place where he might not have been found for weeks. And that would have made all the difference —in the circumstances."

"But what do you know about the circumstances, Uvo?" I could not help asking a bit grimly; for his air of omniscience always prepared me for some specious creation of his own fancy. But for once I was misled, and I knew it from his altered face before I heard his unnatural voice.

"What do I know?" repeated Uvo Delavoye. "Only that one of the neighbours has just had a wire from Mrs. Royle's people to say that she's got a son! That's all," he added, seizing a pipe, "but if you think

a minute you'll see that it explains every other blessed thing."

And I saw that so it did, as far as the unfortunate Royle was concerned; and there was silence between us while I ran through my brief relations with the dead man and Delavoye filled his pipe.

"I never took to the fellow," he continued, in a callous tone that almost imposed upon me. "I didn't like his eternal buttonhole, or the hat on one side, or the awful shade of their beastly blinds, or the colour of the good lady's hair for that matter! Just the wrong red and yellow, unless you happen to wear blue spectacles; and if you'd ever seen them saying good-bye of a morning you'd have wished you were stone-blind. But if ever I marry—which God forbid—may I play the game by my wife as he has done by his! Think of his feelings—with two such things hanging over him—those African accounts on the way as well! Is he to throw himself on his old friend's mercy? No; he's too much of a man, or perhaps too big a villain—but I know which I think now. What then? If there's a hue and cry the

wife'll be the first to hear it; but if he lays a strong false scent, through an honest chap like you, it may just tide over the days that matter. So it has, in point of fact; but for me, there'd have been days and days to spare. But imagine yourself creeping back into your empty hole to die like a rat, and still thinking of every little thing to prevent your being found!"

"And to keep it from looking like suicide when you were!" said I, with yet a lingering doubt in my mind.

"Well, then I say you have the finest suicide ever!" declared Uvo Delavoye. "I only wish I knew when he began to think it all out. Was it before he called you in to see the tap that didn't turn off? Or was it the defective tap that suggested the means of death? In either case, when he nailed up his letter-box, it was not, of course, to keep the postman from the door, but to keep the smell of gas inside if he or anybody else did come. That, I think, is fairly plain."

"It's ingenious," I conceded, "whether the idea's your own or Royle's."

"It must have been his," said Delavoye with conviction. "You don't engineer an elaborate fake and get in one of your best bits by accident. No; there was only one mistake poor Royle made, and it *was* unpremeditated. It was rather touching too. Do you remember my trying to get something from his fingers, just when the knock came?"

I took a breath through my teeth.

"I wish I didn't. What was it?"

"A locket with yellow hair in it. And he'd broken the glass, and his thumb was on the hair itself! I don't suppose," added Delavoye, "it would have meant to anybody else what it must to you and me, Gillon; but I'm not sorry I got it out of his clutches in time."

Yet now he could shudder in his turn.

"And to think," I said at last, recalling the secret and forgotten foreboding with which I myself had entered the house of death; "only to think that at the last I was more prepared for murder than suicide! I almost suspected the poor chap of having killed his wife, and shut her up there!"

"Did you?" said Delavoye, with an untimely touch of superiority. "That never occurred to me."

"But you must have thought something was up?"

"I didn't think. I knew."

"Not what had happened?"

"More or less."

"I wish you'd tell me how!"

Uvo smiled darkly as he shook his head.

"It's no use telling certain people certain things. You shall see for yourself with your own two eyes." He got up and crossed the room. "You know what I'm up to at the British Museum; did I tell you they'd got a fine old last-century plan of the original Estate? Well, for weeks I've had a man in Holborn trying to get me a copy for love or money. He's just succeeded. Here it is."

A massive hereditary desk, as mid-Victorian as all the Delavoye possessions, stood before the open window that looked out into the moonlight; on this desk was a reading gas-lamp, with a smelly rubber tube, of the same maligned period; and there

and thus was the plan spread like a table-cloth, pinned down by ash-tray, inkpot, and the lamp itself, and duly overhung by our two young heads. I carry it pretty clearly still in my mind's eye. The Estate alone, or rather the whole original property and nothing else, was outlined and filled in, and the rest left as white as age permitted. It was like a map of India upside down. The great house was curiously situated in the apex, but across the road a clump of shrubberies stood for Ceylon. Our present Estate was at the thick end, as Delavoye explained, and it was a thrilling moment when he laid his nail upon the Turkish Pavilion, actually so marked, and we looked out into the moonlit garden and beheld its indubitable site. The tunnel was not marked. But Delavoye ran his finger to the left, and stopped on an emblem illegibly inscribed in small faint ancient print.

"It's 'Steward's Lodge,'" said he as I peered in vain; "you shall have a magnifying glass, if you like, to show there's no deception. But the story I'm afraid you'll have to take on trust for the moment.

If you want to see chapter and verse, apply for a reader's ticket and I'll show you both any day at the B.M. I only struck them myself this afternoon, in a hairy tome called 'The Mulcaster Peerage'—and a whole page of sub-titles. They're from one of the epistles of the dear old sinner himself, written as though other people's money had never melted in his noble fist. I won't spoil it by misquotation. But you'll find that there was once an unjust steward, who robbed the wicked lord of this very vineyard, and then locked himself into his lodge, and committed suicide rather than face the fearful music!"

I did not look at Delavoye; but I felt his face glowing like a live coal close to mine.

"This road isn't marked," I said as though I had been simply buried in the plan.

"Naturally; it wasn't made. Would you like to see where it ran?"

"I shouldn't mind," I said with the same poor quality of indifference.

He took a bit of old picture-rod, which he kept for a ruler on his desk, and ran a pair of parallel lines in blue pencil from west to

east. The top line came just under the factor's cottage.

"It's in this very road!" I exclaimed.

"Not only that," returned Delavoye, "but if you go by the scale, and pace the distance, you'll find that the Steward's Lodge was on the present site of the house with red blinds!"

And he turned away to fill another pipe, as though finely determined not to crow or glow in my face. But I did not feel myself an object for magnanimity.

"I thought it was only your ignoble kinsman, as you call him," I said, "who was to haunt and influence us all. If it's to be his man-servant, his maid-servant——"

"Stop," cried Delavoye; "stop in time, my dear man, before you come to one or other of us! Can you seriously think it a mere coincidence that a thing like this should happen on the very spot where the very same thing has happened before?"

"I don't see why not."

"I had only the opposite idea to go upon, Gilly, and yet I found exactly what I expected to find. Was that a fluke?"

"Or a coincidence—call it what you like."

"Call it what *you* like," retorted Delavoye with great good-humour. "But if the same sort of thing happens again, will it still be a coincidence or a fluke?"

"In my view, always," I replied, hardening my heart for ever.

"That's all right, then," said he with his schoolboy laugh. "You pays your money and you takes your choice."

CHAPTER III

A Vicious Circle

The Berridges of Berylstow—a house near my office in the Witching Hill Road—were perhaps the very worthiest family on the whole Estate.

Old Mr. Berridge, by a lifetime of faithful service, had risen to a fine position in one of the oldest and most substantial assurance societies in the City of London. Mrs. Berridge, herself a woman of energetic character, devoted every minute that she could spare from household duties, punctiliously fulfilled, to the glorification of the local Vicar and the denunciation of modern ideas. There was a daughter, whose name of Beryl had inspired that of the house; she was her mother's miniature and echo, and had no desire to ride a bicycle or do anything else that Mrs. Berridge had not done before her. An only

son, Guy, completed the *partie carrée*, and already made an admirable accountant under his father's eagle eye. He was about thirty years of age, had a mild face but a fierce moustache, was engaged to be married, and already picking up books and pictures for the new home.

As a bookman Guy Berridge stood alone.

"There's nothing like them for furnishing a house," said he; "and nowadays they're so cheap. There's that new series of Victorian Classics—one-and-tenpence-halfpenny! And those Eighteenth Century Masterpieces —I don't know when I shall get time to read them, but they're worth the money for the binding alone—especially with everything peculiar taken out!"

Peculiar was a family epithet of the widest possible significance. It was peculiar of Guy, in the eyes of the other three, to be in such a hurry to leave their comfortable home for one of his own on a necessarily much smaller scale. Miss Hemming, the future Mrs. Guy, was by no means deficient in peculiarity from his people's point of view. She affected flowing fabrics of peculiar

shades, and she had still more peculiar ideas of furnishing. On Saturday afternoons she would drag poor Guy into all the second-hand furniture shops in the neighbourhood—not even to save money, as Mrs. Berridge complained to her more intimate friends—but just to be peculiar. It seemed like a judgment when Guy fell so ill with influenza, obviously contracted in one of those highly peculiar shops, that he had to mortgage his summer holiday by going away for a complete change early in the New Year.

He went to country cousins of the suburban Hemmings; his own Miss Hemming went with him, and it was on their return that a difference was first noticed in the young couple. They no longer looked radiant together, much less when apart. The good young accountant would pass my window with a quite tragic face. And one morning, when we met outside, he told me that he had not slept a wink.

That evening I went to smoke a pipe with Uvo Delavoye, who happened to have brought me into these people's ken. And we were actually talking about Guy Berridge and his

affairs when the maid showed him up into Uvo's room.

I never saw a man look quite so wretched. The mild face seemed to cower behind the truculent moustache; the eyes, bright and bloodshot, winced when one met them. I got up to go, feeling instinctively that he had come to confide in Uvo. But Berridge read me as quickly as I read him.

"Don't you go on my account," said he gloomily. "I've nothing to tell Delavoye that I can't tell you, especially after giving myself away to you once already to-day. I daresay three heads will be better than two, and I know I can trust you both."

"Is anything wrong?" asked Uvo, when preliminary solicitations had reminded me that his visitor neither smoked nor drank.

"Everything!" was the reply.

"Not with your engagement, I hope?"

"That's it," said Berridge, with his eyes on the carpet.

"It isn't—off?"

"Not yet."

"I don't want to ask more than I ought," said Uvo, after a pause, "but I always

imagine that, between people who're engaged, the least little thing——"

"It isn't a little thing."

And the accountant shook his downcast head.

"I only meant, my dear chap, if you'd had some disagreement——"

"We've never had the least little word!"

"Has she changed?" asked Uvo Delavoye.

"Not that I know of," replied Berridge; but he looked up as though it were a new idea; and there was more life in his voice.

"She'd tell you," said Uvo, "if I know her."

"Do people tell each other?" eagerly inquired our friend.

"They certainly ought, and I think Miss Hemming would."

"Ah! it's easy enough for them!" cried the miserable young man. "Women are not liars and traitors because they happen to change their minds. Nobody thinks the worse of them for that; it's their privilege, isn't it? They can break off as many engagements as they like; but if I did such

a thing I should never hold up my head again ! "

He buried his hot face in his hands, and Delavoye looked at me for the first time. It was a sympathetic look enough ; and yet there was something in it, a lift of the eyebrow, a light in the eye, that reminded me of the one point on which we always differed.

" Better hide your head than spoil her life," said he briskly. " But how long have you felt like doing either ? I used to look on you as an ideal pair."

" So we were," said poor Berridge, readily. " It's most peculiar ! "

I saw a twitch at the corners of Uvo's mouth ; but he was not the man for sly glances over a bowed head.

" How long have you been engaged ? " he asked.

" Ever since last September."

" You were here then, if I remember ? "

" Yes ; it was just after my holiday."

" In fact you've been here all the time ? "

" Up to these last few weeks."

Delavoye looked round his room as a

cross-examining counsel surveys the court to mark a point. I felt it about time to intervene on the other side.

"But you looked perfectly happy," said I, "all the autumn?"

"So I was, God knows!"

"Everything was all right until you went away?"

"Everything."

"Then," said I, "it looks to me like the mere mental effect of influenza, and nothing else."

But that was not the sense of the glance I could not help shooting at Delavoye. And my explanation was no comfort to Guy Berridge; he had thought of it before; but then he had never felt better than the last few days in the country, yet never had he been in such despair.

"I can't go through with it," he groaned in abject unreserve. "It's making my life a hell—a living lie. I don't know how to bear it—from one meeting to the next—I dread them so! Yet I've always a sort of hope that next time everything will suddenly become as it was before Christmas.

Talk of forlorn hopes! Each time's worse than the last. I've come straight from her now. I don't know what you must think of me! It's not ten minutes since we said good-night." The big moustache trembled. "I felt a Judas," he whispered—"an absolute Judas!"

"I believe it's all nerves," said Delavoye, but with so little conviction that I loudly echoed the belief.

"But I don't go in for nerves," protested Berridge; "none of us do, in our family. We don't believe in them. We think they're a modern excuse for anything you like to do or say; that's what we think about nerves. I'm not going to start them just to make myself out better than I am. It's my heart that's rotten, not my nerves."

"I admire your attitude," said Delavoye, "but I don't agree with you. It'll all come back to you in the end—everything you think you've lost—and then you'll feel as though you'd awakened from a bad dream."

"But sometimes I do wake up, as it is!" cried Berridge, catching at the idea. "Nearly every morning, when I'm dressing, things

look different. I feel my old self again—the luckiest fellow alive—engaged to the sweetest girl! She's always that, you know; don't imagine for one moment that I ever think less of Edith; she always was and would be a million times too good for me. If only she'd see it for herself, and chuck me up of her own accord! I've even tried to tell her what I feel; but she won't meet me half-way; the real truth never seems to enter her head. How to tell her outright I don't know. It would have been easy enough last year, when her people wouldn't let us be properly engaged. But they gave in at Christmas when I had my rise in screw; and now she's got her ring, and given me this one—how on earth can I go and give it her back?"

"May I see?" asked Delavoye, holding out his hand; and I for one was grateful to him for the diversion of the few seconds we spent inspecting an old enamelled ring with a white peacock on a crimson ground. Berridge asked us if we thought it a very peculiar ring, as they all did at Berylstow, and he babbled on about the circumstances of

its purchase by his dear, sweet, open-handed Edith. It did him good to talk. A tinge of health returned to his cadaverous cheeks, and for a time his moustache looked less out of keeping and proportion.

But it was the mere reactionary surcease of prolonged pain, and the fit came on again in uglier guise before he left.

"It isn't so much that I don't want to marry her," declared the accountant with startling abruptness, "as the awful thoughts I have as to what may happen if I do. They're too awful to describe, even to you two fellows. Of course nothing could make you think worse of me than you must already, but you'd say I was mad if you could see inside my horrible mind. I don't think she'd be safe; honestly I don't! I feel as if I might do her some injury—or—or violence!"

He was swaying about the room with wild eyes staring from one to the other of us and twitching fingers feeling in his pockets. I got up myself and stood within reach of him, for now I felt certain that love or illness had turned his brain. But it was only a very small scrap of paper that he fished

out of his waistcoat pocket, and handed first to Delavoye and then to me.

"I cut it out of a review of such a peculiar poem in my evening paper," said Berridge. "I never read reviews, or poems, but those lines hit me hard."

And I read :

"Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!"

"But you don't feel like that!" said Delavoye, laughing at him; and the laughter rang as false as his earlier consolation; but this time I had not the presence of mind to supplement it.

Guy Berridge nodded violently as he held out his hand for the verse. I could see that his eyes had filled with tears. But Uvo rolled the scrap of paper into a pellet, which he flung among the lumps of asbestos glowing in his grate, and took the outstretched hand in his. I never saw man so gentle

with another. Hardly a word more passed. But the poor devil squeezed my fingers before Uvo led him out to see him home. And it was many minutes before he returned.

"I have had a time of it!" said he, putting his feet to the gas fire. "Not with that poor old thing, but his people, all three of them! I got him up straight to bed, and then they kept me when he thought I'd gone. Of course they know there's something wrong, and of course they blame the girl; one knew they would. It seems they've never really approved of her; she's a shocking instance of all-round peculiarity. They little know the apple of their own blind eyes —eh, Gilly?"

"I hardly knew him myself," said I. "He must be daft! I never thought to hear a grown man go on like that."

"And such a man!" cried Uvo. "It's not the talk so much as the talker that surprises me; and by the way, how well he talked, for him! He was less of a bore than I've ever known him; there was passion in the fellow, confound him! Red blood in that lump of road metal! He's not only

sorry for himself. He's simply heartbroken about the girl. But this maggot of morbid introspection has got into his brain and ——how did it get there, Gilly? It's no place for the little brute. What brain is there to feed it? What has he ever done, in all his dull days, to make that harmless mind a breeding-ground for every sort of degenerate idea? In mine they'd grow like mustard and cress. I'd feel just like that if I were engaged to the very nicest girl; the nicer she was, the worse I'd get; but then I'm a degenerate dog in any case. Oh, yes, I am, Gilly. But here's as faithful a hound as ever licked his lady's hand. Where's he got it from? Who's the poisoner?"

"I'm glad you ask," said I. "I was afraid you'd say you knew."

"Meaning my old man of the soil?"

"I made sure you'd put it on him."

Uvo laughed heartily.

"You don't know as much about him as I do, Gilly! He was the last old scoundrel to worry because he didn't love a woman as much as she deserved. It was

quite the other way about, I can assure you."

"Yes; but what about those almost murderous inclinations?"

"I thought of them. But they only came on after our good friend had shaken this demoralising dust off his feet. As long as he stuck to Witching Hill he was as sound as a marriage bell! It's dead against my doctrine, Gillon, but I'm delighted to find that you share my disappointment."

"And I to hear you own it is one, Uvo!"

"There's another thing, now we're on the subject," he continued, for we had not been on it for weeks and months. "It seems that over at Hampton Court there's a portrait of my ignoble kinsman, by one Kneller. I only heard of it the other day, and I was rather wondering if you could get away to spin over with me and look him up. It needn't necessarily involve contentious topics, and we might lunch at the Mitre in that window looking down stream. But it ought to be to-morrow, if you could manage it, because the galleries don't open on Friday, and on Saturdays they're always crowded."

I could not manage it very well. I was supposed to spend my day on the Estate, and, though there was little doing thus early in the year, it might be the end of me if my Mr. Muskett came back before his usual time and did not find me at my post. And I was no longer indifferent as to the length of my days at Witching Hill. But I resolved to risk them for the man who had made the place what it was to me—a garden of friends—however otherwise he might people and spoil it for himself.

We started at my luncheon hour, which could not in any case count against me, and quite early in the afternoon we reckoned to be back. It was a very keen bright day, worthier of General January than his chief-of-staff. Ruts and puddles were firmly frozen; our bicycle bells rang out with a pleasing brilliance. In Bushey Park the black chestnuts stamped their filigree tops against a windless radiance. Under the trees a russet carpet still waited for March winds to take it up. The Diana pond was skinned with ice; goddess and golden nymphs caught every scintillation of cold sunlight as we

trundled past. In a fine glow we entered the palace and climbed to the grim old galleries.

"Talk about haunted houses!" said Uvo Delavoye. "If our patron sinner takes such a fatherly interest in the humble material at his disposal, what about that gay dog Henry and the good ladies in these apartments? I should be sorry to trust living neck to what's left of the old lady-killer." It was the famous Holbein which had set him off. "But I say, Gilly, here's a far worse face than his. It may be my rude forefather; by Jove, and so it is!"

And he took off his cap with unction to a handsome, sinister creature, in a brown flowing wig and raiment as fine as any on the walls. There was a staggering peacock-blue surtout, lined with silk of an orange scarlet, the wide sleeves turned up with the same; and a creamy cascade of lace fell from the throat over a long cinnamon waistcoat piped with silk; for you could swear to the material at sight, and the colours might have been laid on that week. They lit up the gloomy chamber, and the eyes in the periwigged

A handsome, sinister creature, in a brown flowing wig and raiment as fine as any on the walls.

Page 106

head lit them up. The dark eyes at my side were not more live and liquid than the painted pair. Not that Uvo's were cynical, voluptuous, or sly; but like these they reminded me of deep waters hidden from the sun. I refrained from comment on a resemblance that went no further. I was glad I alone had seen how far it went.

"Thank goodness those lips and nostrils don't sprout on our branch!" Uvo had put up his eyebrows in a humorous way of his. "We must keep a weather eye open for the evil that they did living after them on Witching Hill! You may well stare at his hands; they probably weren't his at all, but done from a model. I hope the old Turk hadn't quite such a ladylike——"

He stopped short, as I knew he would when he saw what I was pointing out to him; for I had not been staring at the effeminate hand affectedly composed on the corner of a table, but at the enamelled ring painted like a miniature on the little finger.

"Good Lord!" cried Delavoye. "That's the very ring we saw last night!"

It was at least a perfect counterfeit; the

narrow stem, the high, projecting, oval bezel—the white peacock enamelled on a crimson ground—one and all were there, as the painters of that period loved to put such things in.

"It must be the same, Gilly! There couldn't be two such utter oddities!"

"It looks like it, certainly; but how did Miss Hemming get hold of it?"

"Easily enough; she ferrets out all the old curiosity shops in the district, and didn't Berridge tell us she bought his ring in one? Obviously it's been lying there for the last century and a bit. Bear in mind that this bad old lot wasn't worth a bob towards the end; then you must see the whole thing's so plain, there's only one thing plainer."

"What's that?"

"The entire cause and origin of Guy Berridge's pangs and fears about his engagement. He never had one or the other before Christmas—when he got his ring. They've made his life a Hades ever since, every day of it and every hour of every day, except sometimes in the morning when he was getting up. Why not then? Because

he took off his ring when he went to his bath! I'll go so far as to remind you that his only calm and rational moments last night were while you and I were looking at this ring and it was off his finger!"

Delavoye's strong excitement was attracting the attention of the old soldierly attendant near the window, and in a vague way that veteran attracted mine. I glanced past him, out and down into the formal grounds. Yew and cedar seemed unreal to me in the wintry sunlight; almost I wondered whether I was dreaming in my turn, and where on earth I was. It was as though a touch of the fantastic had rested for a moment even on my hard head. But I very soon shook it off, and mocked the vanquished weakness with a laugh.

"Yes, my dear fellow, that's all very well. But——"

"None of your blooming 'buts'!" cried Uvo, with almost delirious levity. "I should have thought this instance was concrete enough even for you. But we'll talk about it at the Mitre and consider what to do."

In that talk I joined, into those considerations I entered, without arguing at all. It did not commit me to a single article of a repugnant creed, but neither on the other hand did it impair the excellence of Delavoye's company at a hurried feast which still stands out in my recollection. I remember the long red wall of Hampton Court as the one warm feature of the hard-bitten landscape. I remember red wine in our glasses, a tinge of colour in the dusky face that leant toward mine, and a wondrous flow of eager talk, delightful as long as one did not take it too seriously. My own attitude I recapture most securely in Uvo's accusation that I smiled and smiled and was a sceptic. It was one of those characteristic remarks that stick for no other reason. Uvo Delavoye was not in those days at all widely read; but he had a large circle of quotations which were not altogether unfamiliar to me, and I eventually realised that he knew his *Hamlet* almost off by heart.

But as yet poor Berridge's "pangs and fears" was original Delavoye to my ruder culture; and the next time I saw him, on the

Friday night, the pangs seemed keener and the fears even more enervating than before. Again he sat with us in Uvo's room ; but he was oftener on his legs, striding up and down, muttering and gesticulating as he strode. In the end Uvo took a strong line with him. I was waiting for it. He had conceived the scheme at Hampton Court, and I was curious to see how it would be received.

" This can't go on, Berridge ! I'll see you through—to the bitter end ! "

Uvo was not an actor, yet here was a magnificent piece of acting, because it was more than half sincere.

" Will you really, Delavoye ? " cried the accountant, shrinking a little from his luck.

" Rather ! I'm not going to let you go stark mad under my nose. Give me that ring."

" My—*her*—ring ? "

" Of course ; it's your engagement ring, isn't it ? And it's your duty, to yourself and her and everybody else, to break off that engagement with as little further delay as possible."

"But are you sure, Delavoye?"

"Certain. Give it to me."

"It seems such a frightful thing to do!"

"We'll see about that. Thank you; now you're your own man again."

And now I really did begin to open my eyes; for no sooner had the unfortunate accountant parted with his ring, than his ebbing affections rushed back in a miraculous flood, and he was begging for it again in five minutes, vowing that he had been mad but now was sane, and looking more himself into the bargain. But Delavoye was adamant to these hysterical entreaties. He plied Berridge with his own previous arguments against the marriage, and once at least he struck a responsive chord from those frayed nerves.

"Nobody but yourself," he pointed out, "ever said you didn't love her; but see what love makes of you! Can you dream of marriage in such a state? Is it fair to the girl, until you've really reconsidered the whole matter and learnt your own mind once for all? Could she be happy? Would

she be—it was your own suggestion—but are you sure she would be even safe ? "

Berridge wrung his hands in new despair ; yes, he had forgotten that ! Those awful instincts were the one unalterably awful feature. Not that he felt them still ; but to recollect them as genuine impulses, or at best as irresistible thoughts, was to freeze his self-distrust into a cureless cancer.

" I was forgetting all that," he moaned. " And yet here in my pocket is the very book those hopeless lines are from. I bought it at Stoneham's this morning. It's the most peculiar poem I ever read. I can't quite make it out. But that bit was clear enough. Only hear how it goes on ! "

And in a school-childish singsong, with no expression but that involuntarily imparted by his quavering voice, he read twelve lines aloud—

" Some kill their love when they are young,
And some when they are old ;
Some strangle with the hands of Lust,
Some with the hands of Gold :
The kindest use a knife, because——"

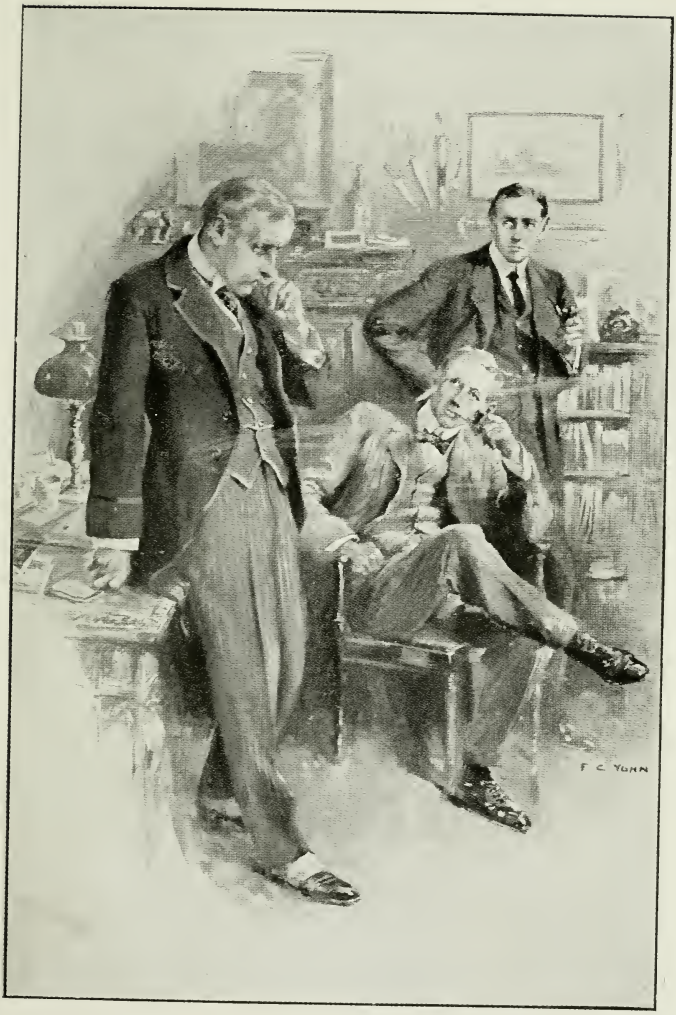
He shuddered horribly—

"The dead so soon grow cold.

"Some love too little, some too long,
Some sell, and others buy;
Some do the deed with many tears,
And some without a sigh:
For each man kills the thing he loves,
Yet each man does not die."

"It's all I'm fit for, death!" groaned Guy Berridge, trying to tug the fierce moustache out of his mild face. "The sooner the better, for me! And yet I did love her, God knows I did!" He turned upon Uvo Delavoye in a sudden blaze. "And so I do still—do you hear me? Then give me back my ring, I say, and don't encourage me in this madness—you—you devil!"

"Give it him back," I said. But Uvo set his teeth against us both, looking almost what he had just been called—looking abominably like that fine evil gentleman in Hampton Court—and I could stand the whole thing no longer. I rammed my own hand into Delavoye's pocket. And down and



Trying to tug the fierce moustache out of his mild face.

Page 114

away out into the night, like a fiend let loose, went Guy Berridge and the ring with the peacock enamelled in white on a blood-red ground.

I turned again to Delavoye. His shoulders were up to his ears in wry good humour.

"You may be right, Gilly, but now I ought really to sit up with him all night. In any case I shall have it back in the morning, and then neither you nor he shall ever see that unclean bird again!"

But he went so far as to show it to me across my counter, not many minutes after young Berridge had shambled past, with bent head and unshaven cheeks, to catch his usual train next morning.

"I did sit up with him," said Uvo. "We sat up till he dropped off in his chair, and eventually I got him to bed more asleep than awake. But he's as bad as ever again this morning, and he has surrendered the infernal ring this time of his own accord I'm to break matters to the girl by giving it back to her."

"You're a perfect hero to take it on!"

"I feel much more of a humbug, Gilly."

"When do you tackle her?"

"Never, my dear fellow! Can't you see the point? This white peacock's at the bottom of the whole thing. Neither of them shall ever set eyes on it again, and then you see if they don't marry and live happy ever after!"

"But are you going to throw the thing away?"

"Not if I can help it, Gilly. I'll tell you what I thought of doing. There's a little working jeweller, over at Richmond, who made me quite a good pin out of some heavy old studs that belonged to my father. I'm going to take him this ring to-day and see if he can turn out a duplicate for love or money."

"I'll go with you," I said, "if you can wait till the afternoon."

"We must be gone before Berridge has a chance of getting back," replied Uvo, doubtfully; "otherwise I shall have to begin all over again, because of course he'll come back cured and roaring for his ring. I haven't quite decided what to say to him, but I fancy my imagination will prove equal to the strain."

This seemed to me a rather cynical attitude to take, even in the best of causes, and it certainly was not like Uvo Delavoye. Only too capable, in my opinion, of deceiving himself, he was no impostor, if I knew him, and it was disappointing to see him take so kindly to the part. I preferred not to talk about it on the road to Richmond, which we took on foot in the small hours of the afternoon. A weeping thaw had reduced the frozen ruts to mere mud piping, of that consistency which grips a tyre like teeth. But it was impossible not to compare this heavy tramp with our sparkling spin through Bushey Park. And the hot and cold fits of poor Guy Berridge afforded an inevitable analogy.

"I can't understand him," I was saying. "I can understand a fellow falling in love and even falling out again. But Berridge flies from one extreme to the other like a ball in a hard rally."

"And it's not the way he's built, Gilly! That's what sticks with me. You may be quite sure he's not the first breeder of sinners who began by shivering on the brink

of matrimony. It's a desperate plunge to take. I should be terrified myself; but then I'm not one of nature's faithful hounds. If it wasn't for the canine fidelity of this good Berridge, I shouldn't mind his thinking and shrinking like many a better man."

We were cutting off the last corner before Richmond by following the asphalt footpath behind St. Stephen's Church. Here we escaped the mud at last; the moist asphalt shone with a cleanly lustre; and our footsteps threw an echo ahead, between the two long walls, until it mixed with the tramp of approaching feet, and another couple advanced into view. They were man and girl; but I did not at first identify the radiant citizen in the glossy hat, with his arm thrust through the lady's, as Guy Berridge homeward bound with his once beloved. It was a groan from Uvo that made me look again, and next moment the four of us blocked the narrow gangway.

"The very man we were talking about!" cried Berridge without looking at me. His hat had been ironed, his weak chin burnished by a barber's shave, the strong

moustache clipped and curled. But a sporadic glow marked either cheek-bone, and he had forgotten to return our salute.

"Yes, Mr. Delavoye!" said Miss Hemming with arch severity. "What have you been doing with my white peacock?"

She had a brown fringe, very crisply curled as a rule; but the damp air had softened and improved it; and perhaps her young gentleman's recovery had carried the good work deeper, for she was a girl who sometimes gave herself airs, but there seemed no room for any in her happy face.

"To tell you the truth," replied Uvo, unblushingly, "I was on my way to show it to a bit of a connoisseur at Richmond." He turned to Berridge, who met his glance eagerly. "That's really why I borrowed it, Guy. I believe it's more valuable than either of you realise."

"Not to me!" cried the accountant readily. "I don't know what I was doing to take it off. I hear it's a most unlucky thing to do."

It was easy to see from whom he had heard it. Miss Hemming said nothing, but looked all the more decided with her mouth

quite shut. And Delavoye addressed his apologies to the proper quarter.

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Hemming! Of course you're quite right; but I hope you'll show it to my man yourselves——"

"If you don't mind," said Berridge, holding out his hand with a smile.

But Uvo had broken off of his own accord.

"I think you'll be glad"—he was feeling in all his pockets—"quite glad if you do—" and his voice died away as he began feeling again.

"Lucky I wired to you to meet me at Richmond, wasn't it, Edie? Otherwise we should have been too late," said the accountant densely.

"Perhaps you are!" poor Uvo had to cry outright. "I—the fact is I—can't find it anywhere."

"You may have left it behind," suggested Berridge.

"We can call for it, if you did," said the girl.

There was something in his sudden worry that appealed to their common fund of generosity.

"No, no! I told you why I was going to Richmond. I thought I had it in my ticket pocket. In fact, I know I had; but I went with my sister this morning to get some flowers at Kingston market, and I haven't had it out since. It's been taken from me, and that was where! I wish you'd feel in my pockets for me. I've had them picked —picked of the one thing that wasn't mine, and was of value—and now you'll neither of you ever forgive me, and I don't deserve to be forgiven!"

But they did forgive him, and that handsomely—so manifest was his distress—so great their recovered happiness. It was only I who could not follow their example, when they had gone on their way, and Delavoye and I were hurrying on ours, ostensibly to get the Richmond police to telephone at once to Kingston, as the first of all the energetic steps that we were going to take. For we were still in that asphalt passage, and the couple had scarcely quitted it at the other end, when Delavoye drew off his glove and showed me the missing ring upon his little finger.

I could hardly believe my eyes, or my ears either when he roundly defended his conduct. I need not go into his defence; it was the only one it could have been; but Uvo Delavoye was the only man in England who could and would have made it with a serious face. It was no mere trinket that he had "lifted," but a curse from two innocent heads. That end justified any means, to his wild thinking. But, over and above the ethical question, he had an inherited responsibility in the matter, and had only performed a duty which had been thrust upon him.

"Nor shall they be a bit the worse off," said Uvo warmly. "I still mean to have that duplicate made, off my own bat, and when I foist it on our friends I shall simply say it turned up in the lining of my overcoat."

"Man Uvo," said I, "there are two professions waiting for you; but it would take a judge of both to choose between your fiction and your acting."

"Acting!" he cried. "Why, a blog like Guy Berridge can act when he's put to it; he did just now, and took you in, evidently! It never struck you, I suppose, that he'd

wired to me this morning to say nothing to the girl, probably at the same time that he wired to her to meet him? He carried it all off like a born actor just now, and yet you curse me for going and doing likewise to save the pair of them!"

It is always futile to try to slay the bee in another's bonnet; but for once I broke my rule of never arguing with Uvo Delavoye, if I could help it, on the particular point involved. I simply could not help it, on this occasion; and when Uvo lost his temper, and said a great deal more than I would have taken from anybody else, I would not have helped it if I could. So hot had been our interchange that it was at its height when we debouched from St. Stephen's Passage into the open cross-roads beyond.

At that unlucky moment, one small suburban Arab, in full flight from another, dashed round the corner and butted into that part of Delavoye which the Egyptian climate had specially demoralised. I saw his dark face writhe with pain and fury. With one hand he caught the offending urchin, and in the other I was horrified to

see his stick, a heavy blackthorn, held in murderous poise against the leaden sky, while the child was thrust out at arm's length to receive the blow. I hurled myself between them, and had such difficulty in wresting the blackthorn from the madman's grasp that his hand was bleeding, and something had tinkled on the pavement, when I tore it from him.

Panting, I looked to see what had become of the small boy. He had taken to his heels as though the foul fiend were at them; his late pursuer was now his companion in flight, and I was thankful to find we had the scene to ourselves. Delavoye was pointing to the little thing that had tinkled as it fell, and as he pointed the blood dripped from his hand, and he shuddered like a man recovering from a fit.

I had better admit plainly that the thing was that old ring with the white peacock set in red, and that Uvo Delavoye was once more as I had known him down to that hour.

"Don't touch the beastly thing!" he cried. 'It's served me worse than it served poor

A heavy blackthorn held in murderous poise.
Page 124

Berridge! I shall have to think of a fresh lie to tell him—and it won't come so easy now—but I'd rather cut mine off than trust this on another human hand!"

He picked it up between his finger-nails. And there was blood on the white peacock when I saw it next on Richmond Bridge.

"Don't you worry about my hand," said Uvo as he glanced up and down the grey old bridge. "It's only a scratch from the blackthorn spikes, but I'd have given a finger to be shot of this devil!"

A flick of his wrist sent the old ring spinning; we saw it meet its own reflection in the glassy flood, like a salmon-fly beautifully thrown; and more rings came and widened on the waters, till they stirred the mirrored branches of the trees on Richmond Hill.

CHAPTER IV

The Local Colour

The Reverend Charles Brabazon, magnetic Vicar of the adjacent Village, had as strong a personality as one could wish to encounter in real life. He did what he liked with a congregation largely composed of the motley worldlings of Witching Hill. Small solicitors and west-end tradesmen, bank officials, outside brokers, first-class clerks in Government offices, they had not a Sunday soul to call their own, these hard-headed holders of season tickets to Waterloo.

Throughout the summer they flocked to church when their hearts were on the river; in the depths of winter they got up for early celebration on the one morning when they might have lain abed. Their most obsequious devotions did not temper the preacher's truculence, any more than his strongest

onslaught discouraged their good works. They gave of their substance at his every call, and were even more lavish on their own initiative. Thus, in my second summer at Witching Hill, the Vicarage was practically rebuilt out of the pockets of parishioners; and we had no difficulty in providing a furnished substitute on the favourite woodland side of Mulcaster Park.

Great was the jealousy in Witching Hill Road, but futile the fluttering of our Queen Anne dovecots; for we saw very little more of the Vicar for having him in our midst. He was always either immured in his study, or else hurrying to or from some service or parochial engagement; and although he had a delightful roadside manner, and the same fine smile for high and low, he would stop to speak to neither on his way. Out of church, in fact, Mr. Brabazon preserved a wise aloofness which only served to emphasise the fierce intimacy of his pulpit utterances, and combined with his contempt of popularity to render him by far the most popular figure in the neighbourhood.

It goes without saying that this remarkable

man was a High Churchman and a celibate. His house was kept, and his social shortcomings made good, by two Misses Brabazon, each as unlike him as possible in her own way. Miss Ruth, who was younger, added to her brother's energy a sympathetic charm and a really good voice which made her the darling of the Parish Hall and humbler edifices. Miss Julia's activities were more sedentary and domestic, as perhaps became the least juvenile of the trio, and so it was that I saw most of her. We had a whole day together over the inventory, and it was Miss Julia who interviewed me about everything else connected with the house. She was never short with me on those occasions, never ungracious or (what is worse) unduly gracious, but she had always a pleasant word, and nearly always an innocent little joke as well. Innocence and jocosity were two of her leading characteristics; another was a genuine but ingenuous literary faculty. This she exercised in editing the *Parish Magazine*, and supplying it with moral serials which occasionally reached volume form under the auspices of the Religious Tract Society.

On an evening late in April, when the cuckoo was wound up in the wood behind Mulcaster Park, and most of the beds in front were flowering for the first time, a gaunt figure came to the gate of the temporary vicarage and beckoned to me passing on the other side of the road. It was Miss Julia, and I found her looking gently humorous and knowing across the gate.

"The trees are coming out so beautifully," she began, "in the grounds behind these gardens. I was wondering if it would be possible to procure a permit to go over them, Mr. Gillon."

"Do you mean for yourself, Miss Brabazon?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact I do."

As she spoke I could not but notice that she glanced ever so slightly towards the house behind her, and that her voice had fallen to a murmur, while a mottled colouring appeared between the lines of her guileless visage.

"I'm afraid I can't do anything," I said. "But the Vicar could, Miss Brabazon!" I

added with conviction. "A line from him to Sir Christopher Stainsby——"

I stopped because Miss Julia shook her head so decidedly.

"That would never do, Mr. Gillon. Sir Christopher is such a very rabid Dissenter."

"So I have heard," I admitted, thinking rather of what I had seen. "But I don't believe he's as narrow as you think."

"I couldn't trouble the Vicar about it, in any case," said Miss Brabazon, hurriedly. "I shouldn't even like him to know that I had troubled you, Mr. Gillon. He's such a severe critic that I never tell him what I'm writing until it's finished."

"Then you are writing something about Witching Hill House, Miss Brabazon?"

"I was thinking of it. I haven't begun. But I never saw any place that I felt such a desire to write about. The old house in the old woods, say a hundred years ago! Don't you think it an ideal scene for a story, Mr. Gillon?"

"It depends on the story you want to tell," said I, sententiously.

A strange light was burning in the weak

eyes of Miss Julia. It might almost have been a flicker of the divine fire. But now she dropped her worn eyelids, and gazed into the road with the dreamy cunning of the born creator.

"I should have quite a plot," she decided. "It would be . . . yes, it would be about some extraordinary person who lived in there, in the wood and the house, only of course ages and ages ago. I think I should make him—in fact I'm quite sure he would be—a very wicked person, though of course he'd have to come all right in the end."

"You must be thinking of the man who really did live there."

"Who was that?"

"The infamous Lord Mulcaster."

"Really, Mr. Gillon? I don't think I ever heard of him. Of course I know the present family by name; aren't these Delavoyes connected with them in some way?"

I explained the connection as I knew it, which was not very thoroughly. But I unfortunately said enough to cause a rapid fall in poor Miss Julia's mottled countenance.

"Then I must give up the idea of that

story. They would think I meant their ancestor, and that would never do. I'm sorry, because I never felt so inclined to write anything before. But I'm very glad you told me, Mr. Gillon."

"But they wouldn't mind a bit, Miss Brabazon! They're not in the least sensitive about him," I assured her.

"I couldn't think of it," replied Miss Julia, haughtily. "It would be in the very worst of taste."

"But Uvo would love it. He's full of the old villain. He might help you if you'd let him. He's at the British Museum at this moment, getting deeper and deeper into what he calls the family mire."

"I happen to see him coming down the road," observed Miss Julia, dryly. "I must really beg that you will not refer to the subject again, Mr. Gillon."

But in her voice and manner there was a hesitating reluctance that emboldened me to use my own judgment about that, especially when Uvo Delavoye (whose mother and sister were keen Brabazonians) himself introduced the topic on joining us, with a

gratuitous remark about his "unfilial excavations in Bloomsbury."

"I've opened up a new lazar-house this very day," he informed us, with shining eyes, when Miss Julia had shown an interest in spite of herself.

"By the way," I cut in, "don't you think it would all make magnificent material for a novel, Uvo?"

"If you could find anybody to publish it!" he answered, laughing.

"You wouldn't mind if he was put into a book—and the place as well?"

"*I* wouldn't, if nobody else didn't! Why? Who's thinking of doing us the honour?"

Dear Miss Julia coughed and laughed with delicious coyness. My liberty had been condoned.

"Was it you, Miss Brabazon?" cried Uvo, straightening his face with the nerve that never failed him at a climax.

"Well, it was and it wasn't," she replied, exceeding slyly. "I did think I should like to write a little story about Witching Hill House, and put in rather a bad character; at least he would begin by being rather

undesirable, perhaps. But I was forgetting that the place had been in your family, Mr. Delavoye. I certainly never knew, until Mr. Gillon told me, that one of the Lords Mulcaster had been—er—perhaps—no better than he ought to have been."

"To put it mildly," said Delavoye, with smiling face and shrieking eyes. "You may paint the bad old hat as black as mine, Miss Brabazon, and still turn him out a saint compared with the villain of the case I've been reading up to-day. So you really needn't worry about anybody's susceptibilities. Lay on the local colour inches deep! You won't make the place as red as the old gentleman painted it in blood and wine!"

"Really, Mr. Delavoye!" cried Miss Julia, jocosely shocked. "You mustn't forget that my story would only appear in our *Parish Magazine*—unless the R.T.S. took it afterwards."

"My rude forefather in a Religious Tract!"

"Of course I should quite reform him in the end."

"You'd have your work cut out, Miss Brabazon."

"I ought to begin with *you*, you know!" said Miss Julia, shaking a facetious finger in Uvo's face. "I'm afraid you're rather an irreverent young man, and I don't know what the Vicar would say if he heard us." She threw another deliciously guilty glance towards the house. "But if you really mean what you say, and you're sure Mrs. Delavoye and your sister won't mind either——"

"Mind!" he interrupted. "Forgive me, Miss Brabazon, but how *could* they be sensitive about the last head but five of a branch of the family which doesn't even recognise our existence?"

"Very well, then! I'll take you at your word, and the—the blood and thunder," whispered Miss Julia, as though they were bad words, "be on your own head, Mr. Delavoye!"

Thereafter, in a quivering silence, Uvo took me home with him, and straight up into his own room, where he first shut door and window without a word. Never since have I heard man laugh quite so loud and long as he did then.

"But you don't see the point!" he arrogated through his tears, because I made rather less noise.

"What is it, then?"

"I told you I'd opened up a new sink to-day?"

"You said something of the sort."

"It was a sink of fresh iniquity. I came across it in an old collection of trials; it isn't as much as mentioned in any memoir of the old reprobate, nor yet in the many annals of Witching Hill. Yet he once figured in one of the most disgraceful cases on record."

The case was all that, as Delavoye summed it up for my benefit. The arch-villain of the piece was of course his scandalous progenitor, aided and abetted by a quite unspeakable crew. There was a sorely distressed heroine in humble life—a poor little milliner from Shoreditch—but because it was all too true, there had been no humble hero to wreak poetic vengeance on the miscreant.

"Not a nursery story, I grant you! But there were some good touches in the version I struck," said Delavoye, producing his museum note-book. "One or two I couldn't

help taking down. 'In obedience to the custom of the times,' for instance, 'the young lord proceeded to perform the grand tour; and it is reported that having sailed from Naples to Constantinople, he there imbibed so great an admiration for the manners of the Turks, that on his return to England in 1766, he caused an outlying portion of his family mansion to be taken down, and to be rebuilt in the form of a harem.'"

"Rot!"

"I took it down word for word. I've often wondered how the Turkish Pavilion got its name; now we know all about it, and why it had a tunnel connecting it with the house."

"Poor little milliner!"

"I believe you, Gilly. Listen to this, when she was a prisoner in his town house, before they spirited her out here—'Looking out of the window at about eight o'clock, she observed a young woman passing, to whom she threw out her handkerchief, which was then heavy with tears, intending to attract her attention and send to her father for assistance.'"

"Because the handkerchief was marked?"

"And so heavy with her tears that she could throw it like a tennis-ball!"

The note-book was put away. There was an end also of our hilarity.

"And this dear old girl," said Uvo, with affectionate disrespect, "thinks she's a fit and proper writer to cope with that immortal skunk! False Sextus in a parish magazine! Proud Tarquin done really proud at last!"

It was on the tip of my tongue to make it quite clear to Uvo that Miss Julia had not wittingly proposed to write about his ancestor at all; that apparently she had never heard of his existence before that evening, and that it was her own original idea to make Witching Hill House the haunt of some purely imaginary scoundrel. But I knew my Uvo well enough by this time to hold my tongue, and at least postpone the tiresome discussion of a rather stale point on which we were never likely to agree.

But I stayed to supper at No. 7; and Uvo kept me till the small hours, listening to further details of his last researches, and to the farrago of acute conjecture, gay reminiscence and vivid hearsay which his reading

invariably inspired. It was base subject-metal that did not gain a certain bright refinement in his fiery mind, or fall from his lips with a lively ring ; and that night he was at his best about things which have an opposite effect on many young men. It must have been after one when I left him. I saw the light go out behind the cheap stained glass in the front door, and I heard Uvo going upstairs as I departed. The next and only other light I passed, in the houses on that side of the road, was at the top of the one which was now the Vicarage. Thence also came an only sound ; it was the continuous crackle of a typewriter, through the open window of the room which I knew Miss Julia had appropriated as her own.

That end of the Estate had by this time a full team of tenants, whereas I had two sets of painters and paperhangers to keep up to the mark in Witching Hill Road. This rather came between me and my friends in Mulcaster Park, especially as my Mr. Muskett lived in their road, and his house had eyes and a tongue. So it happened that I saw no more of Miss Julia Brabazon until she

paid me a queer little visit at my office one afternoon about five o'clock. She was out of breath, and her flurried manner quickened my ear to the sound of her brother's bells ringing in the distance for week-day evensong.

"I thought I'd like to have one word with you, Mr. Gillon, about my story," she panted, with a guilty shrinking from the sheet of glass behind her. "It will be finished in a few days now, I'm thankful to say. I've been so hard at work upon it, you can't think!"

"Oh, yes, I can," said I; for there seemed to be many more lines on the simple, eager countenance; the drollery had gone out of it, and its heightened colouring had an unhealthy, bluish tinge.

"I'm afraid I have been burning the midnight oil a little," she admitted with a sort of coy bravado. "But there seems so much to do during the day, and everything is so quiet at night, unless it's that wretched typewriter of mine! But I muffle the bell, and luckily my brother and sister are sound sleepers."

"You must be keen, Miss Brabazon, to turn night into day."

"Keen? I never enjoyed writing half so much. It's no effort; the story simply writes itself. I don't feel as if it were a story at all, but something that I see and hear and have just got to get down as fast as ever I can! I feel as if I really knew that old monster we were talking about the other day. Sometimes he quite frightens me. And that's why I've come to you, Mr. Gillon. I almost fear I'm making him too great a horror after all!"

It was impossible not to smile. "That would be a difficult matter, from all I hear, Miss Brabazon."

"I meant from the point of view of his descendants in general, and these dear Delavoyes in particular. Rather than hurt their feelings. Mr. Gillon, I need hardly tell you I'd destroy my story in a minute."

"That would be a thousand pities," said I, honestly thinking of her wasted time.

"I'm not so sure," said Miss Julia, doubtfully. "I sometimes think, when I read the newspapers, that there are bad people enough in the world without digging up more from their graves. Yet at other times I don't

feel as if I were doing that either. It's more as though this wicked old wretch had come to life of his own accord and insisted on being written about. I seem to feel him almost at my elbow, forcing me to write down I don't know what."

"But that sounds like inspiration!" I exclaimed, impressed by the good faith patent in the tired, ingenuous, serio-comic face.

"I don't know what it is," replied Miss Julia, "or whether I'm writing sense or nonsense. I never like to look next day. I only know that at the time I quite frighten myself and—make as big a fool of myself as though I were in my poor heroine's shoes—which is so absurd!" She laughed uneasily, her colour slightly heightened. "But I only meant to ask you, Mr. Gillon, whether you honestly and truly think that the Delavoyes won't mind? You see, he really was their ancestor, and I do make him a most odious creature."

"But I don't suppose you give his real name?"

"Oh, dear, no. That would never do. I call him the Duke of Doehampton, and the

story is called ' His Graceless Grace.' Isn't it a good title, Mr. Gillon ? "

I lied like a man, but was still honest enough to add that I thought it even better as a disguise. " I feel sure, Miss Brabazon, that you are worrying yourself unnecessarily," I took it upon myself to assert ; but indeed her title alone would have reassured me, had I for a moment shared her conscientious qualms.

" I am so glad you think so," said Miss Julia, visibly relieved. " Still, I shall not offer the story anywhere until Mr. Delavoye has seen or heard every word of it."

" I thought it was for your own *Parish Magazine* ? "

Miss Julia at last obliged me with her most facetious and most confidential smile.

" I am not tied down to the *Parish Magazine,*" said she. " There are higher fields. I am not certain that ' His Graceless Grace ' is altogether suited to the young—the young parishioner, Mr. Gillon ! I must read it over and see. And—yes—I shall invite Mr. Delavoye to come and hear it, before I decide to send it anywhere at all."

The reading actually took place on an evening in May, when the Vicar had accompanied his younger sister up to Exeter Hall; and at the last moment I also received a verbal invitation, delivered and inspired by that rascal Uvo, who declared that I had let him in for the infliction and must bear my share. More justly, he argued that the pair of us might succeed in keeping each other awake, whereas one alone would infallibly disgrace himself; and we had solemnly agreed upon a system of watch-and-watch, by the alternate quarter-of-an-hour, before we presented ourselves at the temporary vicarage after supper.

Miss Julia received us in stiff silk that supplied a sort of sibilant obbligato to a nervous welcome; and her voice maintained a secretive pitch, even when the maid had served coffee and shut the door behind her, lending a surreptitious air to the proceedings before they could be said to have begun. It was impossible not to wonder what the Vicar would have said to see his elderly sister discoursing profane fiction to a pair of heathens who seldom set foot inside his church.

He would scarcely have listened with our resignation; for poor Miss Julia read as badly as she wrote, and never was story opened with clumsier ineptitude than hers. We had sheet upon typewritten sheet about the early life and virtuous vicissitudes of some deplorably dull young female in the east end of London; and in my case slumber was imminent when the noble villain made his entry in the cinnamon waistcoat of the picture at Hampton Court. At that I tried to catch Uvo's eye, but it was already fixed upon the reader's face with an intensity which soon attracted her attention.

"Isn't that your idea of him, Mr. Delavoye?" asked Miss Julia, apprehensively.

"Well, yes, it is; but it was Sir Godfrey Kneller's first," said Uvo, laughing. "So you took the trouble to go all the way over there to study his portrait, Miss Brabazon?"

"What portrait? All the way over where, Mr. Delavoye?"

Uvo entered into particulars which left the lady's face a convincing blank. She had seen no portrait; it was years since she had been through the galleries at Hampton Court,

and then without a catalogue. Uvo seemed to experience so much difficulty in crediting this disclaimer, that I asked whether cinnamon had not been a favourite colour with the bloods of the eighteenth century. On his assent the reading proceeded in a slightly altered voice, in which I thought I detected a note of not unnatural umbrage.

But far greater coincidences were in store, and those of such a character that it was certainly difficult to believe that they were anything of the sort. Considered as an attempt at dramatic narrative, the story was, of course, beneath criticism. It was all redundant description, gratuitous explanations, facetious turns to serious sentences, and declared intentions which entirely spoilt the effect of their due fulfilment. Bored to extinction with the heroine, who only became interesting on the villain's advent, as his predestined prey, we thenceforth heard no more of her until his antecedents had been set forth in solid slabs of the pluperfect tense. These dwelt with stolid solemnity upon the distinctions and debaucheries of his University career, and

then all at once on the effect of subsequent travel upon a cynical yet impressionable mind. In an instant both of us were attending, and even I guessed what was coming, and what had happened. Probably by half-forgotten hearsay, our dear good lady had tapped the same muddy stream as Uvo Delavoye, and some of the mud had silted into a mind too innocent to appreciate its quality.

"Debased and degraded by the wicked splendours of barbaric courts, the unprincipled young nobleman had decided not only to 'do in Turkey as the Turkeys did,' but to initiate the heathen institution of polygamy among his own broad acres on his return to England, home, and only too much beauty! . . . Poor, innocent, confiding Millicent; little did she dream, when he asked her to be his, that he only meant 'one of the many'; that the place awaiting her was but her niche in the *seraglio* which he had wickedly had built, in a corner of his stately grounds, on some Eastern model."

Delavoye looked at me without a trace of amusement, but rather in alarmed recognition of the weirdly sustained parallel between

rascal fact and foolish fiction. But as yet we had only scratched the thin ice of the situation; soon we were almost shuddering from our knowledge of the depths below.

The unhappy heroine had repulsed the advances of the villain in the story as in the actual case; in both she was from the same locality (where, however, our Vicar had held his last curacy); in both, enticed into his lordship's coach and driven off at a great rate to his London mansion, where the first phase of her harrowing adventures ensued. So innocently were these described that we must have roared over them by ourselves; but there was no temptation to smile under the rosy droll nose of poor Miss Julia, by this time warmed to her work, and reeling off her own interminable periods with pathetic zest. Yet even her jocose and sidelong style could no longer conceal an interest which had become more dramatic than she was aware. Just as it first had taken charge of her pen, so her story had now gained undisputed command of the poor lady's lips; and she was actually reading it far better than at first, as if subconsciously stimulated by our

rapt attention, though mercifully ignorant of its uncomfortable quality. I speak only for myself, and it may be that as a very young man I took the whole business more seriously than I should to-day. But I must own there were some beads upon my forehead when Delavoye relieved the tension by jumping to his feet in unrestrained excitement.

"I'm glad you like that," said Miss Julia, with a pleased smile, "because I thought it was good myself. Her handkerchief would have her name on it, you see; and she was able to throw it out of the window like a stone, at the feet of the first passer-by, because it was so heavy with her tears. Of course she hoped the person who picked it up would see the name and——"

"Of course!" cried Uvo, cavalierly. "It was an excellent idea—I always thought so."

Miss Julia eyed him with a puzzled smirk.

"How could you always think a thing I've only just invented?" she asked acutely.

"Well, you see, it's happened in real life before to-day," he faltered, seeing his mistake.

"Like a good deal of my story, it appears?"

" Like something in every story that was ever written. Truth, you know——"

" Quite so, Mr. Delavoye ! But I saw you looking at Mr. Gillon a minute ago as though something else was familiar to you both. And I should just like to know what it was."

" I'm sure I've forgotten, Miss Brabazon."

" It wasn't the part about the—the Turkish building in the grounds—I suppose ? "

" Yes," said Uvo, turning honest in desperation.

" And where am I supposed to have read about that ? "

" I'm quite certain you never read it at all, Miss Brabazon ! "

Now Miss Julia had lost neither her temper nor her smile, and she had not been more severe on Delavoye than his unsatisfactory manner invited. But the obvious sincerity of his last answer appeased her pique, and she leant forward in sudden curiosity.

" Then there is a book about him, Mr. Delavoye ? "

" Not exactly a book."

" I know ! " she cried. " It's the case

you'd been reading the other night—isn't it ? "

" Perhaps it is."

" Was he actually tried—that Lord Mulcaster ? "

The wretched Uvo groaned and nodded.

" What for, Mr. Delavoye ? "

" His life ! " exclaimed Uvo, moistening his lips. Miss Julia beamed and puckered with excitement.

" How very dreadful, to be sure ! And had he actually committed a murder ? "

" I've no doubt he had," said Uvo, eagerly. " I wouldn't put anything past him, as they say ; but in those days it wasn't necessary to take life in order to forfeit your own. There were lots of other capital offences. The mere kidnapping of the young lady, exactly as you describe it——"

" But did he really do such a thing ? " demanded Miss Julia.

And her obviously genuine amazement redoubled mine.

" Exactly as you have described it," repeated Delavoye. " He travelled in the East, commenced Bluebeard on his return, fished

his Fatima like yours out of some little shop down Shoreditch way, and even drove her to your own expedient of turning her tears to account ! "

And he dared to give me another look—shot with triumph—while Miss Julia supported an invidious position as best she might.

" Wait a bit ! " said I, stepping in at last. " I thought I gathered from you the other day, Miss Brabazon, that you felt the reality of your story intensely ? "

" I did indeed, Mr. Gillon."

" It distressed you very much ? "

" I might have been going through the whole thing."

" It—it even moved you to tears ? "

" I should be ashamed to say how many."

" I daresay," I pursued, smiling with all my might, " that even your handkerchief was heavy with them, Miss Brabazon ? "

" It was ! "

" Then so much for the origin of *that* idea ! It would have occurred to anybody under similar circumstances."

Miss Julia gave me the smile I wanted. I

felt I had gone up in her estimation, and sent Delavoye down. But I had reckoned without his genius for taking a dilemma by the horns.

"This is an old quarrel between Gillon and me, Miss Brabazon. I hold that all Witching Hill is more or less influenced by the wicked old wizard of the place. Mr. Gillon says it's all my eye, and simply will not let belief take hold of him. Yet your Turkish building actually existed within a few feet of where we're sitting now; and suppose the very leaves on the trees still whisper about it to those who have ears to hear; suppose you've taken the whole thing down almost at dictation! I don't know how your story goes on, Miss Brabazon——"

"No more do I," said Miss Brabazon, manifestly impressed and not at all offended by his theory. "It's a queer thing—I never should have thought of such a thing myself—but I certainly did dash it all off as if somebody was telling me what to say, and at such a rate that my mind's still a blank from one page to the next."

She picked the script out of her lap, and

we watched her bewildered face as it puckered to a frown over the rustling sheets.

"I shouldn't wonder," said Delavoye a little hastily, "if his next effort wasn't to subvert her religious beliefs."

"To make game of them!" assented Miss Julia in scandalised undertones. "'The demoniacal Duke now set himself to deface and destroy the beauty of holiness, to cast away the armour of light, and to put upon him the true colours of an aristocratic atheist of the deepest dye.'"

"Exactly what he did," murmured Uvo, with another look at me. It was not a look of triumph unalloyed; it was at least as full of vivid apprehension.

"I shall cross that out," said Miss Julia decidedly. "I don't know what I was thinking of to write anything like that. It really makes me almost afraid to go on."

Uvo shot out a prompt and eager hand.

"Will you let me take it away to finish by myself, Miss Brabazon?"

"I don't think I can. I must look and see if there's anything more like that."

"But it isn't your fault if there is. You've simply been inspired to write the truth."

"But I feel almost ashamed."

And the typewritten sheets rustled more than ever as she raised them once more. But Delavoye jumped up and stood over her with a stiff lip.

"Miss Brabazon, you really must let me read the rest of it to myself!"

"I must see first whether I can let anybody."

"Let me see instead!"

Heaven knows how she construed his wheedling eagerness! There was a moment when they both had hold of the MS., when I felt that my friend was going too far, that his obstinate persistence could not fail to be resented as a liberty. But it was just at such moments that there was a smack of greatness about Uvo Delavoye; given the stimulus, he could carry a thing off with a high hand and the light touch of a born leader; and so it must have been that he had Miss Julia coyly giggling when I fully expected her to stamp her foot.

"You talk about our curiosity," she rallied him. "You men are just as bad!"

"I have a right to be curious," returned Uvo, in a tone that surprised me as much as hers. "You forget that your villain was once the head of our clan, and that so far the fact is quite unmistakable."

"But that's just what I can't understand!"

"Yet the fact remains, Miss Brabazon, and I think it ought to count."

"My dear young man, that's my only excuse for this very infliction!" cried Miss Julia, with invincible jocosity. "If you'd rather it were destroyed, I shall be quite ready to destroy it, as Mr. Gillon knows. But I should like you to hear the whole of it first."

"And I could judge so much better if I read the rest to myself!"

And still he held his corner of the MS., and she hers with an equal tenacity, which I believe to have been partly reflex and instinctive, but otherwise due to the discovery that she had written quite serenely about a blasphemer and an atheist, and not for a moment to any other qualm or apprehension

whatsoever. And then as I watched them their eyes looked past me with one accord; the sheaf of fastened sheets fluttered to the ground between them; and I turned to behold the Vicar standing grim and gaunt upon the threshold, with a much younger and still more scandalised face peeping over his shoulder.

"I didn't know that you were entertaining company," observed the Vicar, bowing coldly to us youths. "Are you aware that it's nearly midnight?"

Miss Julia said she never could have believed it, but that she must have lost all sense of time, as she had been reading something to us.

"I'm sure that was very kind, and has been much appreciated," said the Vicar, with his polar smile. "I suppose this was what you were reading?"

And he was swooping down on the MS., but Delavoye was quicker; and quicker yet than either hand was the foot interposed like lightning by the Vicar.

"You'll allow me?" he said, and so picked the crumpled sheets from under it.

Uvo bowed, and the other returned the courtesy with ironic interest.

In quivering tones Miss Julia began, "It's only something I've been——"

"Considering for the *Parish Magazine*," ejaculated Uvo. "Miss Brabazon did me the honour of consulting me about it."

"And may I ask your responsibility for the *Parish Magazine*, Mr. Delavoye?"

"It's a story," continued Uvo, ignoring the question and looking hard at Miss Julia—"a local story, evidently written for local publication, the scene being laid here at Witching Hill House. The principal character is the very black sheep of my family who once lived there."

"I'm aware of the relationship," said the Vicar, dryly unimpressed.

"It's not one that we boast about; hence Miss Brabazon's kindness in trying to ascertain whether my people or I were likely to object to its publication."

"Well," said the Vicar, "I'm quite sure that neither you nor your people would have any objection to Miss Brabazon's getting to bed by midnight."

He returned to the door, which he held wide open with urbane frigidity. "Now, Julia, if you'll set us an example."

And at the door he remained when the bewildered lady, delivered from an embarrassment that she could not appreciate, and committed to a subterfuge in which she could see no point, had flown none the less readily, with a hectic simper and a whistle of silk.

"Now, gentlemen," continued the Vicar, "it's nearly midnight, as I've said more than once."

"I was to take the story with me, to finish it by myself," explained Uvo, with the smile of a budding ambassador.

"Oh, very well," rejoined the Vicar, shutting the door. "Then we must keep each other a minute longer. I happen myself to constitute the final court of appeal in all matters connected with the *Parish Magazine*. Moreover, Mr. Delavoye, I'm a little curious to see the kind of composition that merits a midnight discussion between my sister and two young men whose acquaintance I myself have had so little opportunity of cultivating."

He dropped into a chair, merely waving to

us to do the same ; and Delavoye did ; but I remained standing, with my eyes on the reader's face, and I saw him begin where Miss Julia had left off and the MS. had fallen open. I could not be mistaken about that ; there was the mark of his own boot upon the page ; but the Vicar read it without wincing at the passage which his sister had declared her intention of crossing out. His brows took a supercilious lift ; his cold eyes may have grown a little harder as they read ; and yet once or twice they lightened with a human relish—an icy twinkle—a gleam at least of something I had not thought to see in Mr. Brabazon. Perhaps I did not really see it now. If you look long enough at the Sphinx itself, in the end it will yield some semblance of an answering look. And I never took my eyes from the Vicar's granite features, as typewritten sheet after sheet was turned so softly by his iron hand, that it might have been some doctrinal pamphleteer who claimed his cool attention.

When he had finished he rose very quietly and put the whole MS. behind the grate. Then I remembered that Delavoye also was

in the room, and I signalled to him because the Vicar was stooping over the well-laid grate and striking matches. But Delavoye only shook his head, and sat where he was when Mr. Brabazon turned and surveyed us both, with the firewood crackling behind his clerical tails.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Delavoye," said he; "but I think you will agree that this is a case for the exercise of my powers in connection with our little magazine. The stupendous production now perishing in the flames was of course intended as a practical joke at our expense."

"And I never saw it!" cried Uvo, scrambling to his feet. "Of course, if you come to think of it, that's the whole and only explanation — isn't it, Gillon? A little dig at the Delavoyes as well, by the way!"

"Chiefly at us, I imagine," said the Vicar dryly. "I rather suspect that the very style of writing is an attempt at personal caricature. The taste is execrable all through. But that is only to be expected of the anonymous lampooner."

"Was there really no name to it, Mr. Brabazon?"

The question was asked for information, but Uvo's tone was that of righteous disgust.

"No name at all. And one sheet of typewriting is exactly like another. My sister had not read it all herself, I gather?"

"Evidently not. And she only read the first half to us."

"Thank goodness for that!" cried the Vicar, off his guard. "The whole impertinence," he ran on more confidentially, "is so paltry, so vulgar, so egregiously badly done! It's all beneath contempt, and I shall not descend to the perpetrator's level by attempting to discover who he is. Neither shall I permit the matter to be mentioned again in my household. And as gentlemen I look to you both to resist the ventilation of a most ungentlemanly hoax."

But the promise that we freely gave did not preclude us from returning at once to No. 7, and there and then concocting a letter to Miss Julia, which I slipped into the letter-box of the makeshift vicarage as the birds were waking in the wood behind Mulcaster Park.

It was simply to say that Uvo was after all afraid that his kith and kin really might resent the publication of her thrilling but painful tale of their common ancestor; and therefore he had taken Miss Brabazon at her word, and the MS. was no more. Its destruction was really demanded by the inexplicable fact that the story was the true story of a discreditable case in which the infamous Lord Mulcaster had actually figured; and the further fact that Miss Brabazon had nevertheless invented it, so far as she personally was aware, would have constituted another and still more interesting case for the Psychical Research Society, but for the aforesaid objections to its publication in any shape or form.

All this made a document difficult to draw up, and none too convincing when drawn; but that was partly because the collaborators were already divided over every feature of the extraordinary affair, which indeed afforded food for argument for many a day to come. But in the meantime our dear Miss Julia accepted sentence and execution with a gentle and even a jocose resignation which made us both miserable. We did not even

know that there had been any real occasion for the holocaust for which we claimed responsibility, or to what extent or lengths the unconscious plagiarism had proceeded. Delavoye, of course, took the view that coincided with his precious theory, whereas I argued from Mr. Brabazon's coolness that we had heard the worst.

But the Vicar always was cool out of the pulpit; and it was almost a pity that we rewarded his moderation by going to church the next Sunday, for I never shall forget his ferocious sermon on the modern purveyor of pernicious literature. He might have been raving from bitter experience, as Delavoye of course declared he was. But there is one redeeming point in my recollection of his tirade. And that is a vivid and consoling vision of the elder Miss Brabazon, listening with a rapt and unconscious serenity to every burning word.

CHAPTER V

The Angel of Life

Coplestone was the first of our tenants who had taken his house through me, and I was extremely proud of him. It was precisely the pride of the mighty hunter in his first kill; for Coplestone was big game in his way, and even of a leonine countenance, with his crested wave of tawny hair and his clear sunburnt skin. In early life, as an incomparable oar, he had made a name which still had a way of creeping into the sporting papers; and at forty the same fine figure and untarnished face were a walking advertisement of virtue. But now he had also the grim eyes and stubborn jaw of the man who has faced big trouble; he wore sombre ties that suggested the kind of trouble it had been; and he settled down among us to a solitude only broken in the holidays of his

only child, then a boy of twelve at a preparatory school.

I first heard of the boy's existence when Coplestone chose the papers for his house. Anything seemed good enough for the "three reception-rooms and usual offices"; but over a bedroom and a play room on the first floor we were an hour deciding against every pattern in the books, and then on the exact self-colour to be obtained elsewhere. It was at the end of that hour that a chance remark, about the evening paper and the latest cricket, led to a little conversation, insignificant in itself, yet enough to bring Coplestone and me into touch about better things than house decoration. Often after that, when he came down of an afternoon, he would look in at the office and leave me his *Pall Mall*. And he brought the boy in with him on the first day of the midsummer holidays.

"Ronnie's a keen cricketer at present," said Coplestone on that occasion. "But he's got to be a wet-bob like his old governor when he goes on to Eton. That's what we're here for, isn't it, Ronnie? We're

going to take each other on the river every blessed day of the holidays."

Ronnie beamed with the brightest little face in all the world. He had bright brown eyes and dark brown hair, and his skin burnt a delicate brown instead of the paternal pink. His expression was his father's, but not an atom of his colouring. His mother must have been a brunette and a beautiful woman. I could not help thinking of her as I looked at the beaming boy who seemed to have forgotten his loss, if he had ever realised it. And yet it was just a touch of something in his face, a something pensive and constrained, when he was not smiling, that gave him also such a look of Coplestone at times.

But as a rule Ronnie was sizzling with happiness and excitement; and it was my privilege to see a lot of him those hot holidays. Coplestone did not go away for a single night or day. Most mornings one met him and his boy in flannels, on their way down to the river, laden with their lunch. But because the exclusive society of the best of boys must eventually bore

the most affectionate of men, I was sometimes invited to join the picnic, and on Saturdays and Sundays I accepted more than once. Those, however, were the days on which I was nearly always bespoke by Uvo Delavoye, and once when I said so it ended in our all going off together in a bigger boat. That day marked a decline in Ronnie's regard for me as an ex-member of a minor school eleven. It was not, perhaps, that he admired me less, but that Delavoye, who played no games at all, had nevertheless a way with him that fascinated man and boy alike.

With Ronnie, it was a way of cracking jokes and telling stories, and taking an extraordinary interest in the boy's preparatory school, so that its rather small beer came bubbling out in a sparkling brew that Coplestone himself had failed to tap. Then Uvo could talk like an inspired professional about the games he could not play, about books like an author, and about adventures like a born adventurer. In Egypt, moreover, he had seen a little life that went a long way in the telling; conversely, one

always felt that he had done a bigger thing or two out there than he pretended. To a small boy, at all events, he was irresistible. Had he been an usher at a school like Ronnie's he would have had a string of them on either arm at every turn. As it was, a less sensible father might well have been jealous of him before the holidays were nearly over.

But it was just in the holidays that Coplestone was at his best; when the boy went back in September, we were to see him at his worst. In the beginning he was merely moody and depressed, and morose towards us two as creatures who had served our turn. The more we tried to cheer his solitude, the less encouragement we received. If we cared to call again at Christmas, he hinted, we should be welcome, but not before. We watched him go off bicycling alone in the red autumn afternoons. We saw his light on half of the night; late as we were, he was always later; and now he was never to be seen at all of a morning. But his grim eyes had lost their light, his ruddy face had changed its shade, and erelong I saw him reeling in broad daylight.

Coplestone had taken to the bottle—and as a strong man takes to everything—without fear or shame. Yet somehow I felt it was for the first time in his life; so did Delavoye, but on other grounds. I did not believe he could have been the man he was when he came to us, if this curse had ever descended on Coplestone before. Yet he seemed to take it rather as a blessing, as a sudden discovery which he was a fool not to have made before. This was no case of surreptitious, shamefaced tippling; it was a cynically open and defiant downfall, at once an outrage on a more than decent community, and a new interest in many admirable lives.

Soon there were complaints which I was requested to transmit to Coplestone in his next lucid interval. But I only pretended to have done so. I thought the complainants a set of self-righteous busybodies, and I vastly preferred the good will of the delinquent. That was partly on Ronnie's account, partly for the sake of the man's own magnificent past, but partly also because his present seemed to me a fleeting phase of sheer insanity, which would end as suddenly

as it had supervened. The form was too bad to be true, even if Coplestone had ever shown it before; and there was now some evidence that he had not.

Delavoye had come down from town with eyes as bright as Ronnie's.

"You remember Sawrey-Biggerstaff by name? He was second for the Diamonds the second year Coplestone won them, and he won them himself the year after. I met him to-day with a man who lunched me at the United University. I told him we had Coplestone down here, and asked him if it was true that he had ever been off the rails like this before, only without breathing a word about his being off them now. Sawrey-Biggerstaff swore that he had never heard of such a libel, or struck a more abstemious hound than Harry Coplestone, or ever heard of him being or ever having been anything else! So you must see what it all means, Gilly."

"It means that he's never got over the loss of his wife."

"But that happened nearly three years ago. Ronnie told me. Why didn't the old

boy break out before? Why save it all up for Witching Hill?"

"I know what you're going to say."

"But isn't it obvious? Our wicked old man drank like an aquarium. His vices are the weeds of this polluted soil; they crop up one after the other, and with inveterate irony he's allotted this one to the noblest creature on the place. It's for us to save him by hook or crook—or rather it's my own hereditary job."

"And how do you mean to set about it?"

"You'll be angry with me, Gilly, but I shan't be happy till I see his house on your hands again. It's the only chance—to drive him into fresh woods and pastures new!"

I was angry. I declined to discuss the matter any further; but I stuck to my opinion that the cloud would vanish as quickly as it had gathered. And Coplestone of all men was man enough to stand his ground and live it down.

But first he must take himself in hand, instead of which I had to own that he was going from bad to worse. He was a man of leisure, and he drank as though he had

found his vocation in the bottle. He was a lonely man, and he drank as though drink was a friend in need and not the deadliest foe. He was the only drunkard I ever knew who drank with impenitent zest; and I saw something of him at his worst; he was more approachable than he had been before his great surrender. All October and November he kept it up, his name a byword far beyond the confines of the Estate, and by December he must have been near the inevitable climax. Then he disappeared. The servants had no idea of his whereabouts; but he had taken luggage. That was the best reason for believing him to be still alive, until he turned up with his boy for the Christmas holidays.

It would be too much to say that he looked as he had looked last holidays. The man had aged; he seemed even a little shaken, but not more than by a moderate dose of influenza; and to a casual eye the improvement was more astounding than the previous deterioration, especially in its rapidity. His spirits were at least as good as they had been before, his hospitality in keeping with the

season. I ate my Christmas dinner with father and son, and Delavoye and I first-footed them on New Year's morning. What was most remarkable on these occasions was the way Coplestone drank his champagne, with the happy moderation of a man who has never exceeded in his life. There was now no shadow of excess, but neither was there any of the weakling's recourse to the opposite extreme of meticulous austerity. A doctor might have forbidden even a hair of the sleeping dog, but to us young fellows it was a joy to see our hero so completely his own man once more.

Early in January came a frost—a thrilling frost—with skating on the gravel-pit ponds beyond the Village. It was a pastime in which I had taken an untutored delight, all the days of my northern youth, and now I put in every hour I could at the clumsy execution of elementary figures. But Coplestone had spent some winters in Switzerland, and he was a past master in the Continental style. Ordinary skaters would form a ring to watch his dazzling displays, and those who had not seen him in the autumn

must have found it hard to credit the whispers of those who had. His pink skin regained its former purity, his blue eyes shone like fairy lamps, and the whole ice rang with the music of his "edge" as he sped careening like a human yacht. It was better still to watch him patiently imparting the rudiments to Ronnie, who picked them up as a small boy will, and worked so hard that the perspiration would stand upon the smooth brown face for all that wondrous frost. It froze, more or less, all the rest of those holidays, and the Coplestones never missed a day until the last of all. I was hoping to find them on the ice at dusk, if only I could manage to get away in time, but early in the afternoon Uvo Delavoye came along to disabuse my mind.

"That young Ronnie's caught a chill," said he—"I thought he would. It'll keep him at home for another day or two, so the ill wind may blow old Coplestone a bit of good. I'm feeling a bit anxious about him, Gilly; wild horses won't drag him from this haunted hill! Just at this moment, however, he's on his way to Richmond to see

if he can get Ronnie the new *Wisden*; and I'm sneaking up to town because I know it's not to be had nearer. I was wondering if you could make time to look him up while we're gone ? "

I made it there and then at the risk of my place; it was not so often that I had Ronnie to myself. But at the very gate I ceased to think about the child. A Pickford van was delivering something at the house. At a glance I knew it for a six-gallon jar of whisky—to see poor Coplestone some little way into the Easter term.

Ronnie lay hot and dry in his bed, but brown and bright as he had looked upon the ice, and sizzling with the exuberance of a welcome that warmed my heart. He told me, of course, that it was " awful rot " losing the last day like this; but, on the other hand, he seemed delighted with his room—he always was delighted with something—and professed himself rather glad of an opportunity of appreciating it as it deserved. Indeed, there was not a lazy bone in his little body, and I doubt if he had spent an unnecessary minute in his bedroom all the

holidays. But they really were delightful quarters, those two adjoining rooms for which no paper in our stock had been good enough. Both were now radiant in a sky-blue self-colour that transported one to the tropics, and certainly looked better than I thought it would when I had the trouble of procuring it.

In the bedroom the blue was only broken by some simple white furniture, by a row of books over the bed, and by groups of the little eleven in which Ronnie already had a place, and photographs of his father at one or two stages of his great career. I was still exploring when an eager summons brought me to the bedside.

"Let's play cricket!" cried Ronnie—"do you mind? With a pack of cards—my own invention! Everything up to six counts properly; all over six count singles, except the picture cards, and most of them get you out. King and queen are caught and bowled, but the old knave's Mr. Extras!"

"Capital, Ronnie!" said I. "Shall it be single wicket between us two, or the next test-match with Australia?"

Ronnie was all for the test, and really the rules worked very well. You shuffled after the fall of every wicket, and you never knew your luck. Tom Richardson, the last man in for England, made sixty-two, while some who shall be nameless went down like ninepins in the van. In the next test (at Lord's) we elaborated the laws to admit of stumping, running out, getting leg-before and even hitting wicket. But the red kings and queens still meant a catch or what Ronnie called "a row in your timber yard." And so the afternoon wore on, until I had to mend the fire and light the gas; and then somehow the cards seemed only cards, and we put them away for that season.

I forget why it was that Ronnie suddenly wanted his knife. I rather think that he was deliberately rallying his possessions about him in philosophic preparation for a lengthy campaign between the sheets. In any case there was no finding that knife, but something much more interesting came to light instead.

I was conducting the search under directions from the bed, but I was out of sight

behind the screen when I kicked up the corner of loose carpet and detected the loosened board. Here, thought I, was a secret repository where the missing possession might have been left by mistake; there were the actual marks of a blade upon the floor. "This looks a likely place," I said; but I did not specify the place I meant, and the next moment I had discovered neither knife nor pencil, but the soiled, unframed photograph of a lovely lady.

There it had lain under the movable bit of board, which had made a certain noise in the moving. That same second Ronnie bounded out of bed, and I to my feet to chase him back again.

"Who told you to look in there? Give that to me this minute! No—no—please put it back where you—where you found it!"

His momentary rage had already broken down in sobs, but he stood over me while I quickly did as he begged and replaced the carpet; then I tucked him up again, but for some time the bed shook under his anguish. I told him how sorry I was, again

and yet again, and I suppose eventually my tone bewrayed me.

"So you know who it is?" he asked, suddenly regarding me with dry bright eyes.

"I couldn't help seeing the likeness," I replied.

"It's my mother," he said unnecessarily. His manner was curiously dogged and unlike him.

"And you keep her photograph under the floor?"

"Yes; you don't see many about, do you?" he inquired with precocious bitterness.

There was not one to be seen downstairs. That I knew from my glimpse of the photograph under the floor; there was nothing like it on any of the walls, nothing so beautiful, nothing with that rather wild, defiant expression which I saw again in Ronnie at this moment.

"But why under the floor?" I persisted, guessing vaguely though I did.

"You won't tell anybody you saw it there?"

"Not a soul."

"You promise?"

"Solemnly."

"You won't say a single word about it, if I tell you something?"

"Not a syllable."

"Well—then—it's because I don't want Daddy to see it, for fear——"

"—it would grieve him?" I suggested as the end of his broken sentence. And I held my breath in the sudden hope that I might be right.

"For fear he tears it up!" the boy said harshly. "He did that once before, and this is the last I've got."

I made no comment, and there were no further confidences from Ronnie. So many things I wanted to know and could not ask! I could only hold my peace and Ronnie's hot hand, until it pinched mine in sudden warning, as the whole house lept under a springy step upon the stairs.

"Not a word to anybody, you know, Mr. Gillon?"

"Not one, to a single soul, Ronnie!"

But it was a heavy seal that was thus placed upon my lips; heavy as lead when I discussed the child with Uvo Delavoye; and

that was almost every minute that we spent together for days to come.

For Ronnie became very ill.

In the beginning it was an honest chill. The chill turned to that refuge of the General Practitioner—influenza. Double pneumonia was its last, most definite stage; the local doctor made no mistake about that, and Coplestone appealed in vain against the verdict, before specialists who came down from London at a guinea a mile.

It was a mild enough case so far. The boy was strong and healthy, and capable of throwing off at least as much as most strong men. He was also a capital little patient—and Coplestone was a magnificent patient's father. He did not harry the doctors; he treated the elderly Scotch nurse like a queen; he was not always in and out of the sick-room by day, and he never set foot in it during the night. In the daytime Delavoye took him for long walks, and I would sit up with him at night until he started nodding in his chair.

The first night he said: "You must have

some whisky, Gillon. I've got a new lot in." And when I said I seldom touched it —" I know you don't, in this house," he rejoined, with his hand for an instant on my shoulder. " But that's all right, Gillon !— Do you happen to know much about Dr. Johnson ? "

" Hardly anything. You should try Uvo."

" Well, I don't know much myself ; but I always remember that when the poor old boy was dying he refused the drugs which were giving him all the peace he got, because he said he'd made up his mind to 'render up his soul to God unclouded.' Now I come to think of it, there's not much analogy," continued Coplestone with a husky laugh. " But I know I'd rather do what Dr. Johnson wouldn't than go up clouded to my little lad if ever he—wanted me ! "

And he took about a teaspoonful from a mistaken sense of hospitality, but no second allowance as the night wore on. The next night I was able to refuse without offending him ; after that the decanter was never touched. Yet once or twice I saw the stopper taken out in sheer absence of mind,

only to be replaced without flurry or hesitation.

Self-control? I never knew a man with more; it came out every hour that we spent together, and before long it was needed almost every minute. One day Delavoye dashed into the office in town clothes and with a tragic face.

"They want a second nurse! It's come to that already," he said, "and I'm going up about it now."

"But isn't that the doctor's job?" I asked, liking the looks of him as little as his news.

"I can't help it if it is, Gilly! I must lend a hand somehow or *I* shall crack up. It's little enough one can do, besides being day-nurse to poor old Coplestone, and this afternoon he's asleep for once. What a great chap he is, Gilly, and will be ever after, if only we can pull the lad through and then get them both out of this! But it's two lives hanging on one thread, and that cursed old man of mine trying all he knows to cut it! I'll euchre him, you'll see. By hook or crook I'll balk him——"

But white clouds were tumbling behind the red houses opposite, and Delavoye dashed out again to catch his train, like the desperate leader of a forlorn hope, leaving his dark eyes burning before mine and his wild words ringing in my ears.

Quite apart from the point on which he was never sane, he seemed to have lost the otherwise level head on which I had learnt to rely at any crisis ; but Coplestone still kept his, and him I admired more and more. He still took his exercise like a man, refrained from harrying nurse or doctor, showed an untroubled face by the sick-bed, but avoided the room more and more, and altogether during the terrible delirious stages.

" If I were to stay there long," he said to me once, " I should make a scene. I couldn't help it. There are more things than one to cloud your mind, and I've got to keep mine unclouded all the time."

He kept it very nearly serene ; and his serenity was not the numbness of despair which sometimes wears the same appearance ; for I do not think there was a moment at which Coplestone despaired. He

had much too stout a heart. There was nothing forced or unnatural in his manner; his feelings were not deadened for an instant, yet not for an instant would he give them rein. Only, our sober vigils cut deeper lines than his excesses before Christmas, and every night left him a hard year older.

We spent them all downstairs in his study. Neither of us was a chess-player, and I was all unversed in cards, but sometimes we played draughts or dominoes by the hour, as though one of us had been Ronnie himself. Often we talked of him, but never as though there were any question of his eventual recovery. Coplestone would only go so far as to bemoan the probability of an entirely lost hockey term, and his eye would steal round to the photograph of last year's hockey eleven at Ronnie's little school, in a place of honour on the mantelpiece, where indeed it concealed one of his own most heroic trophies.

Fitted and proportioned like half a hundred others on the Estate, that study of Coplestone's is one of those Witching Hill

interiors that time cannot dismantle in my mind. It was filled with the memorials of a brilliant boyhood. There were framed photographs of four Cambridge crews, of two Eton eights, of the Eton Society with Coplestone to the fore in white trousers, of the "long low wall with trees behind it" and of the "old grey chapel behind the trees." There were also a number of parti-coloured caps under suspended oars, and more silver in the shape of cups, salvers, and engraved cigarette boxes than his modest staff of servants could possibly keep clean. Over the mantelpiece hung the rules of the Eton Society —under glass—with a trophy of canes decked with light blue ribbons.

"It all looks pretty blatant, I'm afraid," said Coplestone apologetically. "But I thought it would interest Ronnie and perhaps hound him on to cut me out. And now——"

He stopped, and I hoped he was not going on, for this was when Ronnie was at his worst and the second nurse had arrived.

"And now," said Coplestone, "the little sinner wants to be a dry-bob!"

I have not naturally a despondent temperament, but that night I for my part was wondering whether Ronnie would ever go to Eton at all. The delirious stage is always terrifying to the harrowed ignoramus watching by the bed; it is almost worse if one is downstairs, trying not to listen, yet doing little else, and without the nurse's calm voice and experienced eyes to reassure one. That was how I spent that night. The delirium had begun the night before, and been intermittent ever since. But Coplestone was not terrified; he kept both nerve and spirits like a hero. His thought for me brought a lump into my throat. Since I refused to leave him, I must take the sofa; he would do splendidly in the chair. He did better than I could have believed possible. He fell peacefully asleep, and I sat up watching his great long limbs in the lowered gaslight, but always listening while I watched.

Ronnie had not the makings of his father's fine physique. That was one of the disquieting features of the case. He was fragile, excitable, highly strung, as I felt his

poor mother must have been before him. And he was tragically like his hidden portrait of her. I saw it as often as I was permitted a peep at Ronnie. What had she done amiss before she died? That was perhaps the chief thing I wanted to know about her, but after my pledge to Ronnie I felt unable even to discuss the poor soul with Delavoye. But she was only less continually in my mind than Ronnie himself, and to-night it seemed she was in his as well.

"O Mummie! Mummie—darling! My very, very, own little Mummie!"

God knows what had taken me upstairs, except the awful fascination of such wanderings, the mental necessity of either hearing them or knowing that they had ceased. On the stairs I felt so thankful they had ceased; it was in the darkened play-room, now a magazine of hospital appliances, kettles, bottles, and the oxygen apparatus; it was here I heard the joyous ravings of his loving little heart—here, on the threshold between his own two rooms, that I even saw him with his thin arms locked round

the neck of the young nurse who had taken over the night duty.

She heard me. She came to the door and stood in silhouette against the cheerful firelight of the inner room. Its glow just warmed one side of her white cap and plain apparel, then glanced off her high white forehead and made a tear twinkle underneath.

"He thinks I'm his mother," she whispered—"and I'm letting him!"

I went out and pulled myself together on the landing, before sneaking back into the study without waking Coplestone.

In the morning I was dozing behind my counter without compunction, for the vigil had been an absolutely sleepless one for me, when the glass door opened like a clap of thunder, and in comes Delavoye rubbing his hands.

"The doctor's grinning all round his head this morning!" he crowed. "You may take it from me that there's a lot of life in our young dog yet."

"What's his temperature?"

"Down to a hundred and a bit. One

His thin arms locked round the neck of the young nurse.

Page 190

thing at a time. They've scotched that infernal delirium, at all events."

"Since when?"

"Some time in the night. He's not talking any rot this morning."

"But he was fairly raving after midnight. I went up and heard him myself."

Uvo broke into exulting smiles.

"Ah! Gilly," said he, "but now we've got an angel abroad in the house. You can almost hear the beating of her wings!"

"Is that your own, Uvo?"

"No; it's a bit of a chestnut in these days. But it was said originally of the angel of death, Gilly, and I mean the opposite sort of angel altogether."

"The young nurse?"

"Exactly. She's simply priceless. But I knew she would be."

"You knew something about her, then?"

"Enough to bring her down on my own yesterday, and blow the doctor! But he's all for her now."

So, indeed, was I; for though a tear is nowhere more out of place than on the cheek of a trained nurse, yet in none is it

such welcome evidence of human interest and affection. And there was the tender tact of the pretence to which she had lent herself before my eyes; even as a memory it nearly filled them afresh. Yet I could not speak of it to Coplestone, and to Delavoye I would not, lest I were led into betraying that which I had promised Ronnie to keep entirely to myself.

Nurse Agnes we all called her, but I for one hardly saw her again, save on the daily constitutional in grey uniform and flowing veil. The fact was that the improvement in Ronnie was so marked, and so splendidly sustained, that both his father and I were able to get to bed again. The boy himself had capital nights, and said he looked forward to them; on the other hand, for final sign of approaching convalescence, he became just a little difficult by day. Altogether it was no surprise to me to learn that two nurses would not be necessary after the second week; but I was sorry to hear it was Nurse Agnes who was going, and I thought that Uvo Delavoye would be sorrier still.

There was something between them. I

felt sure of that. His rushing up to town to fetch her down, the absurd grounds on which he had pretended to justify that officious proceeding, and then his candid enthusiasm next day, when his protégé had shown her quality, all these were suspicious circumstances in themselves. Yet by themselves, at such a time, they might easily have escaped one's attention. It was a more than suspicious circumstance that brought the whole train home to me.

I was getting my exercise one mid-day when there was nothing doing; suddenly I saw Nurse Agnes ahead of me getting hers. Her thin veil flew about her as she stepped out briskly, but I was walking quicker still; in any case I must overtake her, and it was a chance of hearing more good news of Ronnie; for we never saw anything of her at night, except in firelit glimpses through the sick-room door. Evidently these were not enough for Uvo either; presently I espied him sauntering ahead, and when Nurse Agnes overtook him, instead of my overtaking her, he hardly took the trouble to lift his hat. But they walked on together at a

pace between his and hers, while I waited in a gateway before turning back.

So that was it! I was delighted for Uvo's sake; I tried to feel delighted altogether. At any rate he had chosen a wonderful nurse, but really I had seen so little of the girl . . if that was the word for her. In the apparent absence of other objections, I was prepared for a distinct grievance on the score of age.

However, she was going. That was something, and Uvo did not seem particularly cut up about it after all. But he brought the cab for her himself when the time came; he did not come in; but I saw him through the window as I sat at draughts once more with Coplestone, because it was a Saturday afternoon and Ronnie was not quite so well.

"This must be for Nurse Agnes," I said innocently. "It seems a pity she should go so soon."

"But she's not going yet!" cried Coplestone, upsetting the board. "She's going this evening; the other nurse told me she was. Of course I've got to see her before she goes!"

"I fancy that's her cab," said I, unwilling to give Delavoye away, but feeling much more strongly that Nurse Agnes had saved Ronnie's life.

"I didn't hear the bell," said Coplestone.

"Still, I believe that's Nurse Agnes on the stairs."

I had heard one creak, but only one, and the nurse was on tip-toe outside the door as Coplestone opened it. She might have been a thief, she seemed so startled.

"Why, nurse, what do you mean by trying to give me the slip?" he said in his hearty voice. "Do you know they all tell me you've saved my little chap's life, and yet I've hardly seen you all the time? You'd always fixed him up for the night by the time I'd finished dinner, and I've been so late in the morning that we've kept on missing each other at both ends. You've got to spare me a moment now, you know!"

But Nurse Agnes would only stand mumbling and smiling in the half-lit hall.

"I—I mustn't lose my train," was all I heard.

And then I realised that even I had only

heard her voice once before, and that now it did not sound the same voice. It was not meant to sound the same—that was why—I had it in a flash. And in that flash I saw that Nurse Agnes had been keeping out of our way all these days and nights, keeping us out of her way by a dozen tacit little regulations which had seemed only proper and professional at the time.

But a fiercer light had struck Coplestone like a lash across the eyes. And he started back as though stung and blinded, until Nurse Agnes tried to dart past the door; then his long arm shot out, and I shuddered as he dragged her in by hers.

"You!" he gasped, and his jaw worked as though he had been knocked out in the ring.

"Yes," she said coolly, facing him through her veil; "and they're quite right—I've saved your boy for you. Do you mind letting me go?"

I forced my way past the pair of them, and rushed out to Delavoye waiting with the cab.

"Who is she? Who on earth is this nurse of yours?" I cried without restraint.

He drew me out of ear-shot of the cab-man.

"Has Coplestone spotted her?"

"This very minute—but who is she?"

"His wife."

"I thought she was dead?"

"No; he divorced her three years ago."

"Who told you?"

"Ronnie."

"And you never told me!"

"I promised him I wouldn't tell a soul."

The little rascal! He had bound us both; but there was a characteristic difference as between Delavoye and me, and the feelings that we inspired in that gallant little heart. Whereas I had surprised its secret, Ronnie had confided in Uvo of his own free will and accord.

"And it was he who begged me to bring her, Gilly, when he was at his worst! He said it was his one hope—that she could pull him through—that he knew she could! So I found her, and she did. She wasn't really a nurse, but she was his mother; she was his Angel of Life."

"Will she be forgiven?" I asked, when

we had looked askance at the study windows, that gave us back only the wavering reflection of shrubs and of the chimneys opposite.

"Will she forgive?" returned Uvo sardonically. "It's always harder for the one who's in the wrong, and there's always something to be said for him or her!"

"Does she know that her husband needs to be saved as well?"

"Hush!" said Delavoye. The door had opened. Coplestone came out upon the step, and stood there feeling in his pockets.

I held my breath; and the only creature who counted just then, in all that road of bleak red houses, and in all the wintry world beyond, was the great shaken fellow coming down the path.

"You might give this to the cabby," said he, filling my palm with loose silver. "Just tell him we shan't want him now!"

CHAPTER VI

Under Arms

It must have been in my second year of humble office that the burglary scare took possession of Witching Hill. It was certainly the burglars' month of November, and the fogs confirmed its worst traditions. On a night when the street lamps burst upon one at the last moment, like the flash of cannon through their own smoke, a house in Witching Hill Road was scientifically entered, and the silver abstracted in a style worthy of precious stones. In that instance the thieves got clear away with their modest spoil. It was as though they then made a deliberate sporting selection of the ugliest customer on the Estate. Their choice fell upon a Colonel Arthur Cheffins, who not only kept fire-arms but knew how to use them, and gave such an account of himself that it was a

miracle how the rascals escaped with their lives.

The first I heard of this affair was a volley of gravel on my window at dead of night. Then came Uvo Delavoye's voice through the fog before I quite knew what I was doing at the open window. Colonel Cheffins lived in the house opposite the Delavoyes', where he had lately started a cramming establishment on a small scale; and on his rushing over the road to the rescue, at the first sound of the fusillade, poor Uvo had himself been under fire in the fog. The good colonel was in a great way about it, I gathered, although no harm had been done, and it was only one of the pupils who had loosed off in his excitement. But would I care to come along and inspect the damage then and there? If so, they would be glad to see me, and as yet there was whisky for all comers.

I turned out instantly in my dressing-gown and slippers, found Uvo shivering in his, and raced him to the scene. It took some finding in the fog, until the lighted hall flashed upon us like a dark lantern at arm's

length. In the class room at the back of the house, round the gas fire which obtained in all our houses, pedagogue and pupils were still telling their tale by turns and in chaotic chorus. Their audience was smaller than I expected. A little knot of unsporting tenants seemed more disposed to complain of the disturbance than to take up the chase; but indeed that was hopeless in the fog and darkness, and before long Uvo and I were the only interlopers left. We remained by special invitation, for I had made friends with the colonel over the papering and painting of his house, while Uvo had just shown himself a would-be friend indeed.

"It's a very easy battle to reconstruct," said the crammer at the foot of his stairs. "I was up there on the landing when I took my first shot at the scoundrels. You'll find it in the lower part of the front door. One of them blazed back, and there's the hole in the landing window. I had last word from the mat, and I've been looking for it in the gate, but I begin to hope we may find a drop or two of their blood instead to-morrow morning."

Colonel Cheffins was a little bald man with a tooth-brush moustache, and bright eyes that danced with frank delight in the whole adventure. He looked every inch the old soldier, even in a Jaeger suit of bedroom overalls, and I vastly preferred him to his two young men; but scholastic connections are not formed by picking and choosing your original material. Delavoye and I, however, made as free as they with the whisky bottle as a substitute for adequate clothing, and the one who had nearly committed manslaughter had some excuse in his depression and remorse.

"If I'd hit you," he said to Uvo, "I'd have blown my own silly brains out with the next chamber. I'm not kidding. I wouldn't shoot a man for twenty thousand pounds!"

And he shuddered into the chair nearest the glowing lumps of white asbestos licked by thin blue flames.

"God bless my soul, no more would I!" cried the crammer heartily. "I aimed low on purpose not to do more than wing them; there's my bullet in the door to say so, whereas theirs fairly whistled past my head

on its way through that upstairs window. They're a most desperate gang of sportsmen, I assure you."

"There's certainly something to be said for keeping a revolver," observed Uvo, eyeing the brace now lying on the cast-iron chimneypiece.

"Do you mean to say you haven't got one?" cried Colonel Cheffins.

"I do. I wouldn't keep one even out in Egypt. I hate the beastly things," said Uvo Delavoye.

"But why?"

"Oh, I don't know. There's something so uncanny about them. They lie so snug in your pocket, and you needn't even take them out to send yourself to Kingdom Come!"

"Why yourself, Mr. Delavoye?"

"You never know. You might go mad with the beastly thing about you."

"God bless my soul!" cried the colonel, with cocked eyebrows. "You might go mad while you're shaving, and cut yourself too deep, for that matter!"

"Or when you're waiting for a train, or looking out of a window!" I put in, to

laugh Uvo out of the morbid vein which I understood in him but others might easily misconstrue. I could see the two young pupils exchanging glances as I spoke.

"No," he replied, laughing in his turn, to my relief; "none of those ways would come as easy, and they'd all hurt more. However, to be quite serious, I must own it isn't the time or place for these little prejudices against the only cure for the present epidemic. And yet for my part I'd always rather trust to one of my Soudanese weapons, with which you couldn't have an accident if you tried."

Over the way, his own rooms were freely hung with murderous trophies acquired in the back-blocks of the Nile; but I felt more and more that Uvo Delavoye was wilfully misrepresenting himself to these three strangers; and the best I could hope was that a certain dash of sardonic gaiety might lead them to suppose that it was all his chaff.

"Well," said the colonel, "if those are your views I only hope you haven't many ʌqɐnɪɐɪes in the house."

"On the contrary, colonel, everything we've got over there is a few sizes too big for its

place, and our plate-chest simply wouldn't go into the strong-room of the local bank. So where do you think we keep it ? "

" I've no idea."

" In the bathroom ! " cried Uvo Delavoye, with the shock of laughter which was the refreshing finish of some of his moodiest fits. But you had to know him to appreciate his subtle shades, especially to separate the tangled threads of grim fun and gay earnest, and I feared that the gallant little veteran was beginning to regard him as a harmless lunatic. A shake of his bald head was all his comment on the statement that moved Delavoye himself to sudden mirth. And on the whole I was thankful when the return of a man-servant with a nervous constable, grabbed out of the fog by a lucky dip, provided us with an excuse for groping our way across the road.

" What on earth made you talk all that rot about revolvers ? " I grumbled as we struck his gate.

" It wasn't rot. I meant every word of it."

" The more shame for you, if you did; but you know very well you don't."

"My dear Gilly, I wouldn't live with one of those nasty little weapons for worlds. I —I couldn't, Gilly—not long!"

He had me quite tightly by the hand.

"I'm coming in with you," I said. "You're not fit to be alone."

"Oh, yes, I am!" he laughed. "I haven't got one of those things yet, and I shall never get one. I'd rather thieves broke in and stole every ounce of silver in the place."

So we parted for what was left of the night, instead of turning it into day as we often did with less excuse; and for once my powers of sleep deserted me. But it was not the attempted burglary, or any one of its sensational features, that kept me awake; it was the lamentable conversation of Uvo Delavoye on the subject of fire-arms, and that no longer as affecting other minds, but as revealing his own. I had often heard him indulge his morbid fancies, but never so gratuitously or before strangers. To me he could and would say anything, but of late he had been less free with me and I more anxious about him. He had now been over eighteen months on the shelf.

That was his whole trouble. It was not that he was ever seriously ill, but that he was always well enough to worry because he was no better or fitter for work. His mind raced like an engine, and the futile wear and tear was beginning to tell on the whole machinery. To be sure, he had written a little in a desultory way, but I never thought his heart was in his pen, and his fastidious taste was a deterrent rather than a spur. Yet he railed about the bread of idleness, said a man should be fit or dead, and that his mother and sister would be better off without him. Those ladies were again from home, and the fact did not make it easier to dissociate such sayings from an unhealthy horror of loaded revolvers.

So you may think what I felt the very next evening—which I did insist on spending at No. 7—when the distasteful conversation was renewed and developed to the point of outrage. Daylight and less fog had failed to reveal any trace whatever of the thieves, and it became evident that the colonel's moral victory (he had lost a few spoons) was also a regrettably bloodless

one. I saw no more of him during a day of vain excitement, but at night his card was brought up to Uvo's room, and the old fellow followed like a new pin.

I was in those days none too nice about my clothes, and both of us young fellows were more or less as we had been all day; but the sight of the dapper coach in his well-cut dinner jacket, with shirt-front shining like his venerable pate, and studded with a couple of good pearls, might well have put us to the blush. Under his arm he carried a big cigar-box, and this he presented to Delavoye with a courtly sparkle.

"You rushed to our aid last night, Mr. Delavoye, and we nearly shot you for your pains!" said the colonel. "Pray accept a souvenir which in your hands, I hope, and in similar circumstances, is less likely to end in so much smoke."

Uvo lifted the lid and the gaslight flashed from the plated parts of a six-chambered revolver with a six-inch barrel. It was one of the deadly brace that we had seen on the colonel's chimneypiece in the middle of the night.

"I can't take it from you," said Delavoye, shrinking palpably from the pistol. "I really am most grateful to you, Colonel Cheffins, but I've done nothing to deserve such a handsome gift."

"I beg to differ," said the colonel, "and I shall be sorely hurt if you refuse it. You never know when your turn may come; after your own account of that plate-chest, I shan't lie easy in my bed until I feel you are properly prepared against the worst."

"But my poor mother would rather lose every salt-cellar, Colonel Cheffins, than have a man shot dead on her stairs."

"I shouldn't dream of shooting him dead," replied the colonel. "I shouldn't even go as far as I went last night, if I could help it. But with that barrel glittering in your hand, Mr. Delavoye, I fancy you'd find it easier to keep up a conversation with some intrusive connoisseur."

"Is it loaded?" I asked as Uvo took the weapon gingerly from its box.

"Not at the moment, and I fear these few cartridges are all I can spare. I only

keep enough myself for an emergency. I need hardly warn you, by the way, against pistol practice in these little gardens? It would be most unsafe with a revolver of this calibre. Why, God bless my soul, you might bring down some unfortunate person in the next parish!"

I entirely agreed, but Delavoye was not attending. He was playing with the colonel's offering as a child plays with fire, with the same intent face and meddlesome maladroitness. It was a mercy it was not loaded. I saw him wince as the hammer snapped unexpectedly; then he kept on snapping it, as though the sensation fascinated ear or finger; and just as I found myself enduring an intolerable suspense, Uvo ended it with a reckless light in his sunken eyes.

"I'm a lost man, Gilly!" said he, with a grim twinkle for my benefit. "I was afraid I should be if I once felt it in my paw. It's extraordinarily kind of you, Colonel Cheffins, and you must forgive me if I seem to have been looking your gift in the barrel. But the fact is I have always been rather chary of these pretty things, and I must thank you

for the chance of overcoming the weakness."

His tone was sincere enough. So was the grave face turned upon Colonel Cheffins. But its very gravity angered and alarmed me, and I was determined to have his decision in more explicit terms.

"Then the pistol's yours, is it, Uvo?" I asked, with the most disingenuous grin that I could muster.

"Till death us do part!" he answered. And his laugh jarred every fibre in my body.

I never knew how seriously to take him; that was the worst of his elusive humour, or it may be of my own deficiency in any such quality. I confess I like a man to laugh at his own jokes, and to look as though he meant the things he does mean. Uvo Delavoye would do either—or neither—as the whim took him, and I used sometimes to think he cultivated a wilful subtlety for my special bewilderment. Thus in this instance he was quite capable of assuming an alarming pose to pay me out for any undue anxiety I might betray on his behalf; therefore I had

to admire the revolver in my turn, and even to acclaim it as a timely acquisition. But either Uvo was not deceived, or else I was right as to his morbid feeling about the weapon. He seemed unable to lay it down. Sometimes he did so with apparent resolution, only to pick it up again and sit twisting the empty chambers round and round, till they ticked like the speedometer of a coasting bicycle. Once he slipped in one of the cartridges. The colonel looked at me, and I perched myself on the desk at Uvo's side. But the worst thing of all was the way his hand trembled as he promptly picked that cartridge out again.

We had said not a word, but Uvo rattled on with glib vivacity and the laugh that got upon my nerves. His new possession was his only theme. He could no more drop the subject than the thing itself. It was the revolver, the whole revolver, and nothing but the revolver for Uvo Delavoye that night. He was childishly obsessed with its unpleasant possibilities, but he treated them with a grim levity not unredeemed by wit. His bloodthirsty prattle grew into a quaint and

horrible harangue eked out with quotations that stuck like burs. More than once I looked to Colonel Cheffins for a disapproval which would come with more weight from him than me; but decanter and syphon had been brought up soon after his arrival, and he only sipped his whisky with an amused air that made me wonder which of us was going daft.

"Talk about bare bodkins, otherwise hollow-ground razors!" cried Uvo, emptying his glass. "I couldn't do the trick with cold steel if I tried; but with a revolver you've only got to press the trigger and it does the rest. Then—I wonder if you even live to hear the row?—then, Gilly, it's a case of that 'big blue mark in his forehead and the back blown out of his head!'"

"That wasn't a revolver," said I, for he had taught me to worship his modern god of letters; "that was the Snider that 'squibbed in the jungle.'"

Delavoye looked it up in his paper-covered copy.

"Quite right, Gilly!" said he. "But what price this from the very next piece?

" ' So long as those unloaded guns
We keep beside the bed,
Blow off, by obvious accident,
The lucky owner's head.'

" That's a bit more like it than the big blue mark, eh ? And my gifted author is the boy who can handle these little dears better than anybody else in the class ; he don't only use 'em for moral suasion under arms, but he makes you smell the blood and hear the thunder ! "

Colonel Cheffins seemed to have had enough at last ; he rose to go with rather a perfunctory laugh, and I jumped up to see him out on the plea of something I had to say about his damaged door and window.

" For God's sake, sir, get your revolver back from him ! " was what I whispered down below. " He's not himself. He hasn't been his own man for over a year. Get it back from him before he takes a turn for the worse and—and——"

" I know what you mean," said the colonel, " but I don't believe it's as bad as you think. I'll see what I can do. I might say

I've smashed the other, but I mustn't say it too soon or he'll smell a rat. I must leave him to you meanwhile, Mr. Gillon, but I honestly believe it's all talk."

And so did I as the dapper little coach smiled cheerily under the hall lamp, and I shut the door on him and ran up to Uvo's room two steps at a time. But on the threshold I fell back, for an instant, as though that accursed revolver covered me; for he was seated at his desk, his back to the room, his thumb on the trigger—and the muzzle in his right ear.

I crept upon him and struck it upwards with a blow that sent the weapon flying from his grasp. It had not exploded; it was in my pocket before he could turn upon me with a startled oath.

"What are you playing at, my good fellow?" cried he.

"What are *you?*"

And my teeth chattered with the demand.

"What do you suppose? You didn't think I'd gone and loaded it, did you? I was simply seeing—if you want to know—

whether one would use one's forefinger or one's thumb. I've quite decided on the thumb."

"Uvo," I said, pouring out more whisky than I intended, "this is more than I can stick even from you, old fellow! You've gone on and on about this infernal shooter till I never want to see one in my life again. If you meant to blow out your brains this very night, you couldn't have said more than you have done. What rhyme or reason is there in such crazy talk?"

"I didn't say it was either poetry or logic," he answered, filling his pipe. "But it's a devilish fascinating idea."

"The idea of wanton suicide? You call that fascinating?"

"Not as an end. It's a poor enough end. I was thinking of the means—the cold trigger against your finger—the cold muzzle in your ear—the one frightful bang and then the Great What Next!"

"The Great What Next for you," I said, as his eyes came dancing through a cloud of birdseye, "is Cane Hill or Colney Hatch, if you don't take care."

"I prefer the Village mortuary, if you don't mind, Gilly."

"Either would be so nice for your mother and sister!"

"And I'm such a help to them as I am, aren't I? Think of the bread I win and all the dollars I'm raking in!"

"It would be murder as well as suicide," I went on. "It would finish off one of them, if not both."

He smoked in silence with a fatuous, drunken smile, though he was as sober as a man could be. That made it worse. And it was worst of all when the smile faded from the face to gather in the eyes, in a liquid look of unfathomable cynicism, new to me in Uvo Delavoye, and yet mysteriously familiar and repellent.

"Yes; they're certainly a drawback, Gillon, but I don't know that they've a right to be anything more. We don't ask to be put into this world; surely we can put ourselves out if it amuses us."

"'If it amuses us!'"

"But that's the whole point!" he cried, puffing and twinkling as before. "How

many people out themselves for no earthly reason that anybody else can see, and have their memory insulted by the usual idiotic verdict? They're no more temporarily insane than I am. It's their curiosity that gets the better of them. They want to go at their best, with all their wits about them, as you or I might want to go to Court. If they could take a return ticket, they would; they don't really want to go for good any more than I do. They're doing something they don't really want to do, yet can't help doing, as half of us are, half our time."

"They're weak fools," I blustered. "They're destructive children who've never grown up, and they ought to be taken care of till they do."

He smiled through his smoke with sinister serenity.

"But we all are children, my dear Gilly, and on the best authority most of us are fools. As for the destructive faculty, it's part of human nature and three parts of modern policy; but our politicians haven't the child's excuse of wanting to know how

things are made—which I see at the back of half the brains that get blown out by obvious accident."

"Good-night, Uvo," I said, just grasping him by the arm. "I know you're only pulling my leg, but I've heard about enough for one night."

"Another insulting verdict!" he laughed. "Well, so long, if you really mean it; but do you mind giving me my Webley and Scott before you go?"

"Your what?"

"My present from over the way. It's one of Webley and Scott's best efforts, you know. I had one like it, only the smaller size, when I was out in Egypt."

I thought he had forgotten about the concrete weapon, or rather that he did not know I had picked it up, but expected to find it in the corner where it had fallen when I knocked it out of his hand. My own hand closed upon it in my side pocket, as I turned to face Uvo Delavoye, who had somehow slipped between me and the door.

"So it's not your first revolver?" I temporised.

"No; you've got to have one out there."

"But you didn't think it worth bringing home?"

I was trying to recall his very first remarks about revolvers, after the burglary the night before. And Delavoye read the attempt with his startling insight, and helped me out with impulsive candour.

"You're quite right! I did say I hated the beastly things, but it was a weakness I always meant to get over, and now I have. Do you mind giving me my Webley?"

"What did you do with the other one, Uvo?"

"Pitched it into the Nile, since you're so beastly inquisitive. But I was full of fever at the time, and broken-hearted at cracking up. It's quite different now."

"Is it?"

"Of course it is. I'm not going to do anything rotten. I was only ragging you. Don't be a silly ass, Gillon!"

He was holding out his hand. His face had darkened, but his eyes blazed.

"I'm sorry, Uvo——"

"I'll make you sorrier!" he hissed.

"I can't help it. You couldn't trust yourself in your fever. It's your own fault if I can't trust you now."

He glared at me like a caged tiger, and now I knew the wild sly look in his eyes. It was the look of the Kneller portrait at Hampton Court, but there was no time to think twice about that, with the tiger in him gnashing its teeth in very impotence.

"Oh, very well! You don't get out of this, with my property, if I can help it! I know I'm no match for you in brute strength, but you lay a finger on me if you dare!"

He was almost foaming at the mouth, and the trouble was that I could understand his frenzy perfectly. I would not have stood my own behaviour from any man, and yet I could not have behaved differently if I had tried, for his insensate fury was all of a piece with his delirious talk. I kept my eye on him as on a wild beast, and I saw his roving round the uncouth weapons on the wall. He was edging nearer to them; his hand was raised to pluck one down, his worn face bloated and distorted with his passion. Neither of us spoke; we were past

the stage ; but in the grate the gas fire burnt with a low reproving roar. And then all at once I saw Uvo turn his head as though his sensitive ear had caught some other sound ; his raised hand swept down upon the handle of the door ; and as he softly opened it, the other hand was raised in token of silence, and for one splendid second I looked into a face no longer possessed by the devil, but radiant with the keenest joy.

Then I was at his elbow, and our ears bent together at the open door. Gas was burning on the landing as well as in the hall below ; everything seemed normal to every sense. I was obliged to breathe before another sound came from any quarter but that noisy stove in the room behind us. And then it was more a vibration of the floor, behind the curtains of the half-landing, than an actual sound. But that was enough ; back we stole into Uvo's room.

" They've come," he whispered, simply. " They're in the bathroom—now ! "

" I heard."

" We'll go for them ! "

" Of course."

He reached down the very weapon he had meant for my skull a minute before. It was a great club, studded with brass-headed nails, and also a most murderous battle-axe, so that the same whirl might fell one foe and cleave another. I had taken it from Uvo, and his dancing eyes were thanking me as he loaded the revolver I had handed him in exchange.

There were three stairs down to the half-landing, but Uvo sat up too late at nights not to know the one that creaked. We reached the old maroon curtain without a sound; behind it was the housemaid's sink on the right, and straight in front the bath-room door with a faint light under it. But the light went out before we reached it, and then the door would not open, and with that there was a smothered hubbub of voices and of feet within. It was like the first shot from an ambuscade, but it was our ambuscade, and Uvo's voice rang out in triumph.

"Down with the door or the devils'll do us yet!"

And they sounded as though they might before bolt or hinges gave. As we brought

all our weight to bear, we could hear them huddling out of the window, and somebody whispering sharply, "One at a time; one at a time!" And at that my companion relaxed his efforts inexplicably, but I flew at the key-hole with flat foot and every ounce of my weight behind it; the crash fined off into the scream of splintered wood, and I should have entered head foremost if the man on the other side had not stemmed the torrent of torn woodwork. Even as it was I went down on all fours, and was only struggling to my feet as his figure showed dimly in the open window. Delavoye fired over my head at the same instant, but his revolver "squibbed" like that far-away Snider, and before I could hack with his battle-axe at their rope-ladder, the last of the thieves was safe and sound on *terra firma*.

"Don't do that!" cried Delavoye. "It's our one chance of nabbing 'em."

And he was out of the window and swinging down the rope-ladder while the ruffians were yet in the yard below. But they did not wait to punish his foolhardihood; the

Delavoye fired over my head.

Page 224

gate into the back garden banged before he reached the ground, and he hardly had it open when the last of the bunch of ropes slid hot through my hands.

"After them!" he grunted, giving chase to shadowy forms across the soaking grass. His revolver squibbed again as he ran. They did not stop to return his fire; but across the strawberry bed, at the end of the garden, the high split fence rattled and rumbled with the weight of the flying gang; and there was a dropping crackle of brushwood on the other side, as I came up with Delavoye under the overhanging branches of the horse-chestnuts.

"Going over after them?" I panted, prepared to follow where he led.

"I'm afraid it's no good now," he answered, peering at his revolver in the darkness. The chambers ticked like the reel of a rod. "Besides, there's one of them cast a shoe or something. I trod on it a moment ago." He stooped and groped in the manure of the strawberry bed. "A shoe it is, Gilly, by all that's lucky!"

"You wouldn't like to dog them a bit

further ? " I suggested. " The fellow with one shoe won't take much overhauling ? "

" No, Gilly," said Delavoye, abandoning the chase as incontinently as he had started it, but with equal decision ; " I think it's about time to see what they've taken, as well as what they've left."

Their rope-ladder was still swaying from the bathroom window, and it served our turn again since Uvo was without his key. He climbed up first, and the window flared into a square of gas-light before I gained the sill. The scene within was quite instructive. The family chest was clamped right round with iron bands, like the straps of a portmanteau, and the lock in each band had defied the ingenuity of the thieves ; so they had cut a neat hole in the lid and extracted the contents piecemeal. These were not strewn broadcast about the room, but set out with some method on a dressing-table as well as in the basin and the bath. Apparently the stage of selection had been reached when we interrupted the proceedings, and the first thing that struck me was the amount of fine old plate and silver, candelabra, urns,

salvers and the like, which had not been removed; but Delavoye was already up to the right armpit in the chest, and my congratulations left him grim.

"They've got my mother's jewel-case all right!" said he. "She has one or two things worth all those put together; but we shall see them again unless I'm much mistaken. Come into my room and hear the why and wherefore. Ah! I was forgetting young ambition's ladder; thanks, Gilly. I hope you see how hard it's hooked to the wood-work on this side? It's only been their emergency exit; we shall probably find that they took their tickets at the pantry window. Now for a drink in my room and a bit of Sherlock Holmes' work on the lucky slipper!"

I wish I could describe the change in Uvo Delavoye as he sat at his desk once more, his eager face illumined by the reading gas-lamp with the smelly rubber tube. Eager was not the word for it now, neither was it only the gas that lit it up. At its best, for all its bloodless bronze and premature furrows, the face of Uvo was itself a lamp, that only

flickered to burn brighter, or to beam more steadily; and now he was at his best in the very chair and attitude in which I had seen him at his worst not so many minutes before. Was this the fellow who had toyed so tremulously with a deadly weapon and a deadlier idea? Was it Uvo Delavoye who had deliberately debauched his mind with the thought of his own blood, until to my eyes at least he looked capable of shedding it at the morbid prompting of a degenerate impulse? I watched him keenly examining the thing in his hands, chuckling and gloating over a trophy which I for one would have taken far more seriously; and I could not believe it was he whom I had caught with a revolver, loaded or unloaded, screwed into his ear.

It was in a silence due to two divergent lines of thought that we both at once became aware of a prolonged but muffled tattoo on the door below.

"Coppers ahoy!" cried Uvo softly. "I thought you hauled the rope-ladder up after us?"

"So I did; but how do you know it's a copper?"

"Who else could it be at this time of night? Stay where you are, Gilly. I'll go down and see." And in a moment there was a new tune from the hall below: "Why, it's Colonel Cheffins! . . . How sporting of you, colonel! . . . Yes, come on up and I'll tell you all about it."

The colonel's answers were at first inaudible up above; but on the stairs he was explaining that he had awakened about an hour ago with a conviction that yet another house had been attacked, that in his inability to get to sleep again he had ultimately risen, and seeing a light still burning across the road, had ventured to come over to inquire whether we were still all right. And with that there entered the Jaeger dressing-suit and bedroom slippers, containing a very different colonel from the dapper edition I had seen out on the other side of midnight, and for that matter but a worn and feeble copy of the one we had both admired the night before.

"That's Witching Hill all over!" cried Uvo as he ushered him in. "You dreamed of what actually happened at the very time

it was actually happening. And yet our friend Gillon can't see that the whole place is haunted and enchanted from end to end!"

"I'm not sure that I should go as far as that," said the colonel, sinking into a chair, while Delavoye mixed a stiff drink for him in his old glass. "In fact, now you come to put it that way, I'm not so sure that it was a dream at all. I sleep with my window open, at the front of the house, and I rather thought I heard shots of sorts."

"Of such a sort," laughed Uvo, "that you must be a light sleeper if they woke you up. Do you mind telling me, colonel, where you used to keep those cartridges you were kind enough to give me?"

"In my washstand drawer. I hope there was nothing the matter with them?"

"They wouldn't go off. That was all."

"God bless my soul!" cried Colonel Cheffins, putting down his glass.

"The caps were all right, but I am afraid you can't have kept your powder quite dry, colonel. I expect you've been swilling out that drawer in the heat of your ablutions.

Devil a bullet would leave the barrel, and I tried all three."

"But what an infernal disgrace!" cried the colonel, shuffling to his slippered feet. "Why, the damned things ought to go off if you raised them from the bottom of the sea! I'll let the makers have it in next week's *Field*, libel or no libel, you see if I don't! But that won't console either you or me, Mr. Delavoye, and I can't apologise enough. I only hope the scoundrels were no more successful here than they were at my house?"

"I'm afraid they didn't go quite so empty away."

"God bless my soul! Those cartridge makers ought to indemnify you. But perhaps they left some traces? That was the worst of it in my case—neither footmark nor finger-print worth anything to any body!"

"I'm afraid they left neither here."

"But you don't know that, Mr. Delavoye; you can't know it before morning. The frost broke up with the fog, you must remember, and the ground's as soft as

butter. Which way did the blackguards run ? "

" Through the garden and over the wall at the back into——"

" Then they *must* have left their card this time ! " said Colonel Cheffins, ten years younger in his excitement, and even more alert and wide-awake than we had found him the night before. He did not conceal his anxiety to conduct immediate investigations in the garden. But Uvo persuaded him to wait till we had finished our drinks, and we got him to sit down at the desk, trembling with keenness.

" You see," said Uvo, leaning forward in the arm-chair and opening a drawer in the pedestal between them, " one of them did leave something in the shape of a card, and here it is."

And there lay the cast shoe, in the open drawer, under the colonel's eyes and mine as I looked over his shoulder.

" Why, it's an evening pump ! " he exclaimed.

" Exactly."

" Made by quite a good maker, I should

say. All in one piece, without a seam, I mean."

"I see. I hadn't noticed that; but then I haven't your keen eye, colonel. You really must come out into the garden with us."

"I shall be delighted, and we might take this with us to fit into any tracks——"

"Precisely; but there's just one thing I should like you to do first, if you would," said Uvo deferentially, and I bent still further over the colonel's shiny head.

"What's that, Mr. Delavoye?"

"Just to try on the glass slipper—so to speak, Colonel Cheffins—because it's so extraordinarily like the one you were wearing when you were here before!"

There was a moment's pause in which I saw myself quite plainly in the colonel's head. Then, with a grunt and a shrug, he reached out his left hand for the shoe, but his right slid inside his Jaeger jacket, and that same second my arms were round him. I felt and grabbed his revolver as soon as he did, and I held the barrel clear of our bodies while he emptied all six chambers through his garments into the floor.

Then we bound our fine fellow with his own rope-ladder, reloaded both revolvers with unexpurgated cartridges discovered upon his person, and prepared to hold a grand reception of his staff and "pupils." But those young gentlemen had not misconstrued the cannonade. And it was some days before the last of the gang was captured.

They were all tried together at the December sessions of the Central Criminal Court, when their elaborate methods were very much admired. The skilful impersonation of the typical Army coach by the head of the gang, and the adequate acting of his confederates in the subordinate posts of pupils and servants, were features which appealed to the public mind. The taking of the house in Mulcaster Park, as a base for operations throughout a promising neighbourhood, was a measure somewhat overshadowed by the brilliant blind of representing it as the scene of the first robberies. It was generally held, however, that in presenting a predestined victim with a revolver and doctored cartridges, the master thief had

gone too far, and that for that alone he deserved the exemplary sentence to which he listened like the officer and gentleman he had never been. So the great actor lives the part he plays.

It is a perquisite of witnesses to hear these popular trials with a certain degree of comfort ; and so it was that I was able to nudge Uvo Delavoye, at the last soldierly inclination of that bald bad head, before it disappeared from a world to which it has not yet returned.

" Well, at any rate," I whispered, " you can't claim any Witching Hill influence this time."

" I wish I couldn't," he answered in a still lower voice.

" But you've just heard that our bogus colonel has been a genuine criminal all his life."

" I wasn't thinking of him," said Uvo Delavoye. " I was thinking of a still worse character, who really did the thing I felt so like that night before we heard them in the bathroom. Not a word, Gilly ! I know you've forgiven me. But I'm rather sorry

for these beggars, for they came to me like flowers in May."

And as his face darkened with a shame unseen all day in that doleful dock, it was some comfort to me to feel that it had never been less like its debased image at Hampton Court.

CHAPTER VII

The Locked Room

It was no great coincidence that we should have been speaking of Edgar Nettleton that night. Uvo Delavoye was full of him just then, and I had the man on my mind for other reasons. Besides, I had to talk to Uvo about something, since he was down with a quinsy caught from the perfect sanitation in advertised vogue on the Estate, and could hardly open his own mouth. And perhaps I had to talk to somebody about the unpleasant duty hanging over me in connection with this fellow Nettleton, who had taken his house about the same time as Colonel Cheffins and his gang, had made up to Delavoye over that affair, and was himself almost as undesirable a tenant from my point of view.

"I know he's a friend of yours, and I

haven't come to curse him to your face," I had been saying. "But if you would just tell Nettleton, when you see him again, that we're in dead earnest this time, you might be doing both him and us a service. I sent him a final demand yesterday; if he doesn't pay up within the week, my orders are to distrain without further notice. Muskett's furious about the whole thing. He blames me for ever having truck with such a fellow in the first instance. But when a man has been science beak in a public school —and *such* a school—it sounds good enough for Witching Hill, doesn't it? Who would have thought he'd had the sack? Public-school masters don't often get it."

"They've got to do something pretty desperate first, I fancy," whispered Uvo, with a gleam in his sunken eyes. He had not denied the fact. I felt encouraged to elaborate my grievance against Edgar Nettleton.

"Besides, I had his banker's reference. That was all right; yet we had trouble to get our very first rent, more trouble over the second, and this time there's going to

be a devil of a row. I shouldn't wonder if Nettleton had a bill of sale over every stick. I know he's owing all the tradesmen. He may be a very clever chap, and all that, but I can't help saying that he strikes me as a bit of a wrong 'un, Uvo."

Of course I had not started with the intention of saying quite so much. But the brunt of the unpleasantness was falling on my shoulders; and the fellow had made friends with my friend, whose shoes he was not fit to black. Uvo, moreover, was still according me a patient, interested hearing, as he lay like a bright-eyed log in his bed at the top of No. 7. Altogether it was not in my allowance of human nature to lose such an opportunity of showing him his new friend in his true colours.

"He *is* clever," whispered Uvo, as though that was the bond between them. "He knows something about everything, and he's a wonderful carpenter and mechanic. You must really see the burglar-trap that he concocted after the scare. If another Cheffins paid him a visit, he'd put his foot in it with a vengeance."

"It would be six of one and very nearly half a dozen of the other," said I with hardihood. "Set a Nettleton to catch a Cheffins, as you might say, Uvo!"

But he only smiled, as though he would not have hesitated to say it in fun. "Of course you're only joking, Gilly, but I could quite understand it if you weren't. There's no vice in old Nettleton, let alone crime; but there's a chuckle-headed irresponsibility that might almost let him in for either before he knew it. He never does seem to know what he's doing, and I'm sure he never worries about anything he's once done. If he did, he'd have gone further afield from the scene of his downfall, or else taken rooms in town instead of a red elephant of a house that he evidently can't afford. As a tenant, I quite agree that he is hopeless."

"If only he hadn't come here!" I grumbled. "What on earth can have brought him to Witching Hill, of all places?"

Uvo's eyes were dancing in the light of the reading gas-lamp, with the smelly tube, which had been connected up with his bedroom bracket.

" Of course," he whispered, " you wouldn't admit for a moment that it might be the call of the soil, and all there's in it, Gilly ? "

" No, I wouldn't ; but I'll tell you one thing," I exclaimed, as it struck me for the first time : " the man you describe is not the man to trust with all those morbid superstitions of yours ! I know he enters into them, because you told me he did, and I know how much you wanted to find some one who would. But so much the worse for you both, if he's the kind you say he is. An idle man, too, and apparently alone in the world ! I don't envy you if Nettleton really does come under the influence of your old man of the soil, and plays down to him ! "

" My dear Gilly, this is a great concession," whispered Uvo, on his elbow with surprise.

" I don't mean it for one," said I sturdily " I only mean the influence of your own conception of your old man and his powers. I disbelieve in him and them as much as ever, but I don't disbelieve in your ability to make both exist in some weaker mind

than your own. And where they do catch on, remember, those wild ideas of yours may always get the upper hand. It isn't everybody who can think the things you do, Uvo, and never look like doing 'em ! "

" I don't agree with you a bit, Gilly. I never believe those blithering blighters who attribute their crimes to the bad example of some criminal hero of the magazines or of the stage. Villain-worship doesn't carry you to that length unless you're a bit of a villain in the first instance."

" But suppose you are ? " I argued, almost before I saw the point that I was making. " Suppose you have as few scruples, principles, ' pangs and fears '—call them what you like—as this fellow Nettleton. Suppose you're full of fire of sorts, but also as irresponsible and chuckle-headed as you yourself say he is. Well, then, *I* say, it's taking responsibility for two to go pumping your theories into as sensitive an engine as all that ! "

Uvo clapped his thin hands softly as there came a knock at the door. " Well, he's a practical man, Gilly, I must admit,

so let's leave it at that. Come in! What is it, Jane?"

"The servant from Mr. Nettleton's, sir, wants to see Mr. Gillon," said the maid.

I began by explaining why this scarcely comes into the category of Witching Hill coincidences. Yet it was rather startling at the time, and Uvo Delavoye looked as though his evil ancestor had materialised at the foot of the bed.

"All right, Jane! Mr. Gillon will be down directly."

It was the first time his voice had risen to more than a whisper, and it was shaky. The maid seemed to catch some echo of an alarm already communicated to herself, and faintly sounded in her own announcement.

"Sarah seems very anxious to see you, sir," she ventured, turning to me, and then withdrew in some embarrassment.

I rose to follow. Sarah was almost as great a character as her master, and I for one liked her the better of the two. She was a simple, faithful, incompetent old body, who once told me that she had known Mr. Nettleton, man and boy, most of his

life, but without betraying a page of his past. She had come with him to Witching Hill Road as cook-general. There had been a succession of auxiliary servants who had never in any instance outstayed their month. The last of them had left precipitately, threatening a summons, to the scandal of the neighbours; but beyond that fact the matter had been hushed up, and even I only knew that Sarah was now practically single-handed through her coming to me about a charwoman. I thought I ought to see her at once, but Uvo detained me with an almost piteous face.

"Do wait a moment! Of course it's probably nothing at all; but you've given me an idea that certainly never crossed my mind before. I won't say you've put the fear of God on me, Gilly, but you have put me in rather a funk about old Nettleton! He is a rum 'un—I must admit it. If he should have done anything that could possibly be traced to . . . all that . . . I'll never open my mouth about it again."

Oh, bless your life, it's only more servant troubles," I reassured him. "I shouldn't

wonder if old Sarah herself finds him more than she can stick. They do say he assaulted that last girl, so that she could hardly limp into her cab ! "

Uvo rolled his head on the pillow.

" It wasn't an assault, Gilly. I know what happened to her. But I must know what's happened to old Sarah, or to Nettleton himself. Will you promise to come back and tell me ? "

" Certainly."

" Then off you go, my dear fellow, and I'll hang on to my soul till you get back. You may have to go along with her, if he's been doing anything very mad. Take my key, and tell them downstairs not to lock you out."

Sarah was waiting for me on the front-door mat, but she refused to make any communication before we left the house. She really was what she herself would have described as an elderly party, though it is doubtful whether even Sarah would have considered the epithet appropriate to her years. She certainly wore a rather jaunty bonnet on her walks abroad. It had a

garish plume that nodded violently with her funny old head, and simply danced with mystery as she signified the utter impossibility of speech within reach of other ears.

"I'm very sorry to trouble you, sir, very," said the old lady, as she trotted beside me up Mulcaster Park. "But I never did know such a thing to 'appen before, and I don't like it, sir, not at all I don't, I'm sure."

"But what has happened, Sarah?"

As a witness Sarah would not have been a success; she believed in beginning her story very far back, in following it into every by-way and blind alley of immaterial fact, in reporting every scrap of dialogue that she could remember or improvise, and in eschewing the oblique oration as an unworthy economy of time and breath. If interrupted, she would invariably answer a question that had not been asked, and on getting up to any real point she would shy at it like a fractious old steed. It was then impossible to spur her on, and we had to retrace much ground at her pleasure. The

ipsissima verba of this innocent creature are therefore frankly unprintable. But towards the top of Mulcaster Park I did make out that a number of pointless speeches, delivered by Mr. Nettleton at his lunch, had culminated in the announcement that he was going to the theatre that night.

"The theatre!" I cried. "I thought he never even went up to town?"

I had gathered that from Delavoye, and Sarah confirmed it with much embroidery. I was also told his reasons for making such a sudden exception, and as given by Sarah they were certainly not convincing.

"Then he's in the theatre now, or ought to be?" I suggested; for it was then just after nine o'clock.

"Ah, that's where it is, sir!" said Sarah, weightily. "He *ought* to be, as you say, sir. But he's locked his lib'ry, and there's a light under the door, and I can't get no answer, not though I knock, knock, knock, till I'm tired of knocking!"

I now ascertained that Sarah also had been given money to make a night of it, in her case at the Parish Hall, where one

of the church entertainments was going on. Sarah made mention of every item on the programme, as far as she had heard it out. But then it seemed she had become anxious about her kitchen fire, which she had been ordered to keep up for elaborate reasons connected with the master's bath. There had been no fire in the lib'ry that day; it was late in February, but exceptionally mild for the time of year. She knew her master sometimes left his lib'ry locked, after that what happened the last house-parlourmaid, and serve people right for going where they had no business. She could not say that he had left it locked on this occasion; she only knew it was so now, and a light under the door, though he had gone away in broad daylight.

This room, in which Nettleton certainly kept his books, but also his carpenter's bench, test-tubes and retorts, and a rack of stoppered bottles, was the one at the back leading into the garden. It was meant for the drawing-room in this particular type of house, was of considerable size, but only divided from the kitchen by a jerry-built

wall. Sarah could not say that she had heard a sound in the lib'ry—though she often did hear master, as she was setting there of a evening—since he went away without his tea. Of course she had not noticed the light under the door till after dark; not, in fact, till she came back from her entertainment. No; she had not thought of going into the room to draw the curtains. The less she went in there, without orders, the better, Sarah always thought. And yet, when she trotted in front of me through her kitchen and scullery, and so round to the French windows of the sealed chamber, we found them closely shuttered, as they must have been left early in the afternoon, unless Nettleton had returned from his theatre and locked himself in.

It was with rather too vivid a recollection of the finding of Abercromby Royle, in a corresponding room in Mulcaster Park, that I went on to my office for an assortment of keys.

"Now, Sarah, you stand sentinel at the gate," I said on my return. "If Mr. Nettleton should come back while I'm busy,

keep him in conversation while I slip out through your kitchen. I don't much like my job, Sarah, but neither do I think for a moment that there's anything wrong."

Yet there was a really bright layer of light under the door in which I now tried key after key, while the old body relieved me of her presence in order to keep a rather unwilling eye up the road.

At last a key fitted, turned, and the door was open for me to enter if I dared; and never shall I forget the scene that presented itself when I did.

The room was unoccupied. That was one thing. Neither the quick nor the dead lay in wait for me this time. A mere glance explored every corner; the scanty furniture was that of a joiner's shop and a laboratory in one; all the library to be seen was a couple of standing bookcases, not nearly full. But my eyes were rooted in horror to the floor. It also was bare, in the sense that there was no carpet, though a rug or two had been roughly folded and piled on the carpenter's bench. In their place, from skirting-board to skirting-board, the floor was ankle-deep

in shavings. And among the shavings, like so many lighthouses in a yellow sea, burnt four or five fat ecclesiastical candles. They were not in candlesticks; at first I thought that they were mounted merely in their own grease. But Nettleton had run no such risk of one toppling before its time. Their innocent little flames were within an inch or so of the shavings—one was nearer still—but before I could probe the simple secret of the vile device, there was a rustle at my elbow, and there stood Sarah with her nodding plume.

"Well, I never did!" she exclaimed in a scandalised whisper. "Trying to set fire to the 'ouse—oh, fie!"

The grotesque inadequacy of these comments, taken in conjunction with her comparative composure, made me suspect for one wild moment that Sarah herself was an accomplice in the horrible design. She grasped it at a glance, much quicker than I had done, and it seemed to shock her very much less. I snatched up one of the candles—they were pinned in place with black-headed toilet pins—and I lit the

gas with it before stalking through the shavings and setting a careful foot upon the rest in turn.

When I had extinguished the last of them, I turned to find my innocent old suspect snivelling on the threshold, and nodding her gay plume more emphatically than ever.

"'Ow awful!" she ejaculated in hushed tones. "Madness, I call it. Setting fire to a nice 'ouse like this! But there, he's been getting queer for a long time. I've often said so—to myself, you know, sir—I wouldn't say it to nobody else. That burgular business was the beginning."

"Well, Sarah," I said, "he's got so queer that we must think what's to be done, and think quickly, and do it double-quick! But I shall be obliged if you'll stick to your excellent rule of not talking to outsiders. We've had scenes enough at Witching Hill, without this getting about."

"Oh! I shan't say a word, sir," said Sarah, solemnly. "Even pore Mr. Nettleton, he shall never know from *me* how I found him out!"

I could hardly believe my ears. "Good

God, woman! Do you dream of spending another night under this maniac's roof?"

"Why, of course I do, sir," cried old Sarah, bridling. "Who's to look after him, if I go away and leave him, I should like to know? The very idea!"

"I'll see that he's looked after," said I, grimly, and went and bolted the front door, lest he should return before I had decided on my tactics.

In the few seconds that my back was turned, Sarah seemed to have acquired yet another new and novel point of view. I found the old heroine almost gloating over her master's dreadful handiwork

"Well, there, I never did see anything so artful! Him at his theatre, to come home and look on at the fire, and me at my concert, safe and sound as if I was at church! Oh, he'd see to that, sir; he wouldn't've done it if he 'adn't've arranged to put me out of 'arm's way. That's Mr. Nettleton, every inch. Not that I say it was a right thing to do, sir, even with the 'ouse empty as it is. But what can you expect when a pore gentleman goes out of 'is 'ead?

There's not many would care what 'appened to nobody else! But the artfulness of 'im: in another minute the whole 'ouse might've been blazing like a bonfire! Well, there, you do 'ear of such things, and now we know 'ow they 'appen."

To this extraordinary tune, with many such variations, I was meanwhile making up my mind. The first necessity was to place the intrepid old fool really out of harm's way, and the next was to save, the house if possible, but also and at all costs the good name of the Witching Hill Estate. We had had one suicide, and it had not been hushed up quite as successfully as some of us flattered ourselves at the time; one case of gross intemperance, most scandalous while it lasted, and one gang of burglars actually established on the Estate. People were beginning to talk about us as it was; a case of attempted arson, even if the incendiary were proved a criminal lunatic, might be the end of us as a flourishing concern. It is true that I had no stake in the Company whose servant I was; but one does not follow the dullest avocation for three years without

taking a certain interest of another kind. At any rate I intended the secret of this locked room to remain as much a secret as I could keep it, and this gave me an immediate leverage over Sarah. Unless she took herself off before her master returned, I assured her I would have him sent, not to an asylum, but to the felon's cell which I described as the proper place for him. I was not so sure in my own mind that I meant him to go to one or the other. But this was the bargain that I proposed to Sarah.

It came out that she had friends, in the shape of a labouring brother and his wife and family, whom I strongly suspected of having migrated on purpose to keep in touch with Sarah's kitchen, no further away than the Village. I succeeded in packing the old thing off in that direction, after making her lock her door at the top of the house. Previously I had removed the marks of my boot from the extinguished candles, and had left the locked room locked once more and in total darkness. Sarah and I quitted the house together before ten o'clock.

"I'll see that your master doesn't do

himself any damage to-night," were my last words to her. " He'll think the candles have been blown out by a draught under the door—which really wouldn't catch them till they burnt quite low—and that you are asleep in your bed at the top of the house. You've left everything as though you were; and that alone, as you yourself have pointed out, is enough to guarantee his not trying it on again to-night. You see, the fire was timed to break out before you left your entertainment, as it would have done if you'd seen the programme through. Tell your people that Mr. Nettleton's away for the night, and you've gone and locked yourself out by mistake. Above all, don't come back, unless you want to give the whole show away; he'd know at once that you'd discovered everything, and even your life wouldn't be safe for another minute. Unless you promise, Sarah, I'll just wait for him myself—with a policeman ! "

My reasoning was cogent enough for that simple mind; on the other hand, the word of such an obviously faithful soul was better than the bond of most; and altogether it

was with considerable satisfaction that I heard old Sarah trot off into the night, and then myself ran every yard of the way back to the Delavoyes' house.

Up to this point, as I still think, I had done better than many might have done in my place. But for my promise to Uvo, and the fact that he was even then lying waiting for me to redeem it, I would not have rushed to a sick man with my tale. Yet I must say that I was thankful I had no other choice, as matters stood. And I will even own that I had formed no definite plans beyond the point at which Uvo, having heard all, was to give me the benefit of his sound judgment in any definite dilemma.

To my sorrow he took the whole thing in an absolutely different way from any that I had anticipated. He took it terribly to heart. I had entirely forgotten the gist of our conversation before I left him; he had been thinking of nothing else. The thing that I had expected to thrill him to the marrow, that would have done nothing else at any other time, simply harrowed him after what it seemed that I had

said three-quarters of an hour before. Whatever I had said was overlaid in my mind, for the moment, by all that I had since seen and heard. But Uvo Delavoye might have been brooding over every syllable.

"You said you wouldn't envy me," he cried, huskily, "if poor old Nettleton fell under the influence in his turn. You spoke as if it was *my* influence; it isn't, but it may be that I'm a sort of medium for its transmission! Sole agent, eh, Gilly? My God, that's an awful thought, but you gave it me just now and I sha'n't get shot of it in a hurry! None of these beastly things happened before *I* came here—I, the legitimate son of this infernal soil! I'm the lightning-conductor, I'm the middleman in every deal!"

"My dear Uvo, we've no time for all that," I said. He had started up in bed, painfully excited and distressed, and I began to fear that I might have my work cut out to keep him there. "We agreed to differ about that long ago," I reminded him.

"It's only another way of putting what you said just now," he answered. "You said you did believe in my power of infecting

another fellow with my ideas; you spoke of my responsibility if the other fellow put them into practice; and now he's done this hideous thing, had done it even when we were talking!"

"He hasn't done it yet, and I mean to know the reason if he ever does," said I, perhaps with rather more confidence than I really felt. I went on to outline my various notions of prevention. Uvo found no comfort in any of them.

"You can't trust him alone there for the night, after this, Gilly! He'll pull it off, Sarah or no Sarah, if you do. And if you send him either to prison or an asylum—but *you* won't be sending him! That's just it, Gilly. He'll have been sent by me!"

It was a case of the devil quoting scripture, but I was obliged to tell Uvo, as though I had found it out for myself, that criminals and criminal lunatics were not made that way. Villain-worshippers did not go to such lengths unless they had the seeds of madness or of crime already in them. Uvo could not repudiate his own thesis, but he said that if that were so he had watered those

seeds in a way that made him the worst of the two. There was no arguing with him, no taking his part against this ruthless self-criticism. He owned that in Nettleton he had found a sympathetic listener at last, that he had poured the whole virus of his ideas into those willing ears, and now here was the result. He threatened to get up and dress, and to stagger into the breach with me or instead of me. No need to recount our contest on that point. I prevailed by undertaking to do any mortal thing he liked, as long as he lay where he was with that quinsy.

"Then save the fellow somehow, Gilly," he cried, "only don't you go near Nettleton to-night! He obviously isn't safe; take the other risk instead. Since the old soul's out of the house, let him set fire to it if he likes; that's better than his murdering you on the spot. Then we must get him quietly examined, without letting him know that we know anything at all; and if a private attendant's all he wants, I swear I'm his man. It's about the least I can do for him, and it would give me a job in life at last!"

I did not smile at my dear old lad. I gave him the assurance his generosity required, and I meant to carry it out, subject to a plan of my own for watching Nettleton's house all night. But all my proposals suffered a proverbial fate within ten minutes, when I was about to pass the still dark house, and was suddenly confronted by Nettleton himself, leaning over the gate as though in wait for me.

And here I feel an almost apologetic sense of the inadequacy of Nettleton's personality to the part that he was playing that night; for there was nothing terrifying about him, nothing sinister or grotesque. The outward man was flabbily restless and ineffective, distinguished from the herd by no stronger features than a goatee beard and the light, quick, instantaneously responsive eye of an uncannily intelligent child. And no more than a child did I fear him; man to man, I could have twisted his arm out of its socket, or felled him like an ox with one blow from mine. So I thought to myself, the very moment I stopped to speak to him; and perhaps, by so thinking, recognised some

subtler quality, and confessed a subtle fear.

"I was looking for my old servant," said Nettleton, after a civil greeting. "She's not come in yet."

"Oh! hasn't she?" I answered, and I liked the ring of my own voice even less than his.

"Anyhow I can't make her hear, and the old fool's left her door locked," said Nettleton.

"That's a bad plan," said I, not to score a silly point, but simply because I had to say something with conviction. It was a mistake. Nettleton peered at me by the light from the nearest lamp-post.

"Have you seen anything of her?" he asked suspiciously.

"Yes!" I answered, in obedience to the same necessity of temperament.

"Well?" he cried.

"Well, she seemed nervous about something, and I believe she has gone to her own people for the night."

We stood without speaking for nearly a minute. A soft step came marching round

the asphalt curve, throwing a bright beam now upon its indigo surface, and now over the fussy fronts of the red houses, as a child plays with a bit of looking-glass in the sun. "Good-night, officer," said Nettleton as the step and the light passed on. And I caught myself thinking what an improvement the asphalt was in Witching Hill Road, and how we did want it in Mulcaster Park.

"We can't talk out here, and I wish to explain about this wretched rent," said Nettleton. "Come in—or are you nervous too?"

I gave the gate a push, and he had to lead the way. I should not have been so anxious to see a real child in front of me. But Nettleton turned his back with an absence of hesitation that reassured me as to his own suspicions; and indeed none were to be gleaned from his unthoughtful countenance when he had lit up his hall without waiting for me to shut the front door. At that I did shut it, and accepted his invitation to smoke a pipe in his den; for I thought I could see exactly how it was.

Nettleton, having found his candles out and his servant flown, having even guessed

that I knew something and perhaps suspected more, was about to show me my mistake by taking me into the very room where the conflagration had been laid for lighting. Of course I should see no signs of it, and would presently depart at peace with a tenant whose worst crime was his unpunctuality over the rent. Nothing could suit me better. It would show that the house really was safe for the night, while it would give time for due consideration, and for any amount of conferences with Uvo Delavoye.

So I congratulated myself as I followed Nettleton into the room that had been locked ; of course it was unlocked now that he was at home, but it was still in perfect darkness as I myself had left it. The shavings rustled about our ankles ; but no doubt he would think there was nothing suspicious about the shavings in themselves. Yet there was one difference, perceptible at once and in the dark. There was a smell that I thought might have been there before, but unnoticed by Sarah and me in our excitement. It was a strong smell, however, and it reminded me of toy steamers and of picnic teas.

"One moment, and I'll light the gas. We're getting in each other's way," said Nettleton. I moved instinctively, in obedience to a light touch on the arm, and I heard him fumbling in the dark behind me. Then I let out the yell of a lifetime. I am not ashamed of it to this day. I had received a lifetime's dose of agony and amazement.

My right foot had gone through the floor, gone into the jaws of some frightful monster that bit it to the bone above the ankle!

"Why, what's the matter?" cried Nettleton, but not from the part of the room where I had heard him fumbling, neither had he yet struck a light.

"You know, you blackguard!" I roared, with a few worse words than that. "I'll sort you for this, you see if I don't! Strike a light and let me loose this instant! It's taking my foot off, I tell you!"

"Dear, dear!" he exclaimed, striking a match at once. "Why, if you haven't gone and got into my best burglar-trap!"

He stood regarding me from a safe distance, with a sly pale smile, and the wax vesta held on high. I dropped my eyes to

my tortured leg: a couple of boards had opened downward on hinges, and I could see the rusty teeth of an ancient man-trap embedded in my trousers, and my trousers already darkening as though with ink, where the pierced cloth pressed into quivering flesh and bone.

"It's the very same thing that happened to that last maid of mine," continued Nettleton. "I shouldn't wonder if you'd never seen a trap like that before. There aren't so many of 'em, even in museums. I picked this one up in Wardour Street; but it was my own idea to set it like that, and I went and quite forgot I'd left it ready for the night!"

That was the most obvious lie. He had set the thing somehow when he had pretended to be going to light the gas. But I did not tell him so. I did not open my mouth—in speech. I heard him out in a dumb horror; for he had stooped, and was lighting the candles one by one.

They were all where they had always been, except one that I must have kicked over on entering. Nettleton looked at that

candle wistfully, and then at me, with a maniacally sly shake of the head; for it lay within my reach, but out of his; and it lay in a pool, beneath glistening shavings, for the whole room was swimming in the stuff that stank.

The lighting of the candles—in my brain as well as on the floor—had one interesting effect. It stopped my excruciating pain for several moments. We stood looking at each other across the little low lights, like Gullivers towering over Liliputian lamp-posts; that is, he stood, well out of arm's-length, while I leant with all my weight on one bent knee. Suddenly he gleamed and slapped his thigh.

"Why, I do believe you thought I was going to set fire to the house!" he cried.

"I knew you were."

"No—but now?"

"Yes—now—I see it in your damned face!"

"Really, Mr. Gillon!" exclaimed Nettleton, with a shake of his cracked head. "I hadn't thought of such a thing. But I am in a difficulty. The gas is on your side of the

room, just out of your reach. So is the control of the very unpleasant arrangement that's got you by the heel. Is it the ankle? Oh! I'm sorry; but it's no use your looking round. I only meant the trap-door control; the trap itself has to be taken out before you can set it again, and it's a job even with the proper lever. After what's happened and the language you've been using, Mr. Gillon, I'm afraid I don't care to trust myself within reach of your very powerful arms, either to light the gas or to meddle with my little monster."

"See here," I said through the teeth that I had set against my pain. "You're as mad as a hatter; that's the only excuse for you——"

"Thank you!" he snapped in. "Then it won't be the worse for me if I *do* give you a taste of hell before your death and —cremation!"

"I'm sorry for you," I went on, partly because I did not know that the insane call for more tact than the sane, and partly because I was far from sure which this man was, but had resolved in any case to

appeal with all my might to his self-interest. "I'm sorry for anybody who loses his wits, but sorriest for those who get them back again and have to pay for what they did when they weren't themselves. You go mad and commit a murder, but you're dead sane when they hang you! That seems to me about the toughest luck a man could have, but it looks very like being your own."

"Which of these four candles do you back to win?" inquired Nettleton, looking at them and not at me. "I put my money on the one nearest you, and I back this one here for a place."

"Two people know all about this, I may tell you," said I with more effect. Nettleton looked up. "Uvo Delavoye's one, and your old Sarah's the other."

"That be blowed for a yarn!" he answered, after a singularly lucid interval, if he was not lucid all the time. "I think I see you walking into a trap like this if you knew it was here!"

"It's the truth!" I blustered, feeling to my horror that the truth had not rung true.

"All right! Then you deserve all you

get for coming into another man's house——"

"When your servant came for me, and when we found out together that you were trying to burn it down?"

I was doing my best to reason with him now, but he was my master, sane or crazy. His cleverness was diabolical. He took the new point out of my mouth. "Yes—for going away and standing by to see me do it!" he cried. "But that's not the only crow I've got to pluck with you, young fellow, and the other jacks-in-office behind you. Must pay your dirty extortionate rent, must I? Very last absolutely final application, was it? Going to put a man in possession, are you? Very nice—very good! You're in possession yourself, my lad, and I wish you joy of your job!"

He made for the door, hugging the wall with unnecessary caution, leaving a book-case tottering as an emblem of his respect. But at the door he recovered both his courage and his humour.

"I always meant to give him a warm reception," he cried—"and by God you're going to get one!"

He opened the door—made me a grotesque salute—and it was all that I could do to keep a horrified face till he was gone. Never had I thought him mad enough to leave me before he was obliged. Yet the front door closed softly in its turn; now I was alone in the house, and could have clapped my hands with joy. I plunged them into my pockets instead, took out the small shot of my possessions, and fired them at the candles, even to my watch. But my hand had shaken. I was balanced on one leg and suffering torments from the other. The four flames burnt undimmed. Then I stripped to the waist, made four bundles of coat and waistcoat, shirt and vest. It was impossible to miss with these. As I flung the fourth, darkness descended like a kiss from heaven —and a loud laugh broke through the door.

Nettleton came creeping in along the wall, lit the candles one by one, and said he was indebted to me for doing exactly what he thought I would, and throwing away my own last means of meddling with his arrangements!

I went mad myself. I turned for an appreciable time into the madder man of the

two; the railing and the raving were all on my side. They are not the least horrible thing that I remember. But I got through that stage, thank God! I like to think that one always must if there is time. There was time, and to spare, in my case. And there were those four calm candles waiting for me to behave myself, burning away as though they had never been out, one almost down to the shavings now, all four in their last half-inch, yet without another flicker between them of irresolution or remorse, true ecclesiastical candles to the end!

I had spat at them till my mouth was like an ash-pit; but there they burnt, corpse candles for the living who was worse than dead, mocking me with their four charmed flames. But mockery was nothing to me now. Nettleton had killed the nerve that mockery touches. When I shouted he gave me leave to go on till I was black in the face; nobody would hear me through the front of the house, and perhaps I remembered the heavy shutters he had made for the French windows at the time of the burglar scare? He went round to see if he could

hear me through them, and he came back rubbing his hands. But now I took no more notice of his taunts. The last and cruellest was at the very flecks of blood on floor and shavings, flung far as froth in my demented efforts to tear either my foot from the trap or myself limb from limb. . . . And I had only sworn at him in my terrible preoccupation.

"No, that's where *you're* going, old cock!" he had answered. "And by the way, Gillon, when you get there I wish you'd ask for your friend Delavoye's old man of the soil; tell him his mantle's descended on good shoulders, will you? Tell him he's not the only pebble on the shores of Styx!"

That gave me something else to think about towards the end; but I had no longer any doubt about the man's inveterate insanity. His pale eyes had rolled and lightened with unstable fires. There had been something inconsecutive even in his taunts. Consistent only in keeping out of my way, he had explained himself once when I was trying to picture the wrath to come upon him, in the felon's dock, in the condemned cell, on

the drop itself. It was only fools who looked forward or back, said Edgar Nettleton.

And I, who have done a little of both all my life, like most ordinary mortals, as I look back to the hour which I had every reason to recognise as my last on earth, the one redeeming memory is that of the complete calm which did ultimately oust my undignified despair. It may have been in answer to the prayers I uttered in the end instead of curses; that is more than man can say. I only know that I was not merely calm at the last, but immensely interested in what Nettleton would have called the winning candle. It burnt down to the last thin disk of grease, shining like a worn florin in the jungle of shavings that seemed to lean upon the flame and yet did not catch. Then the wick fell over, the last quarter-inch of it, and I thought that candle had done its worst. Head and heart almost burst with hope. No! the agony was not to be prolonged to the next candle, or the next but one. The very end of the first wick had done the business in falling over. I had forgotten that strong

smell and the pools now drying on the floor.

It began in a thin blue spoonful of flame, that scooped up the worn grease coin, grew into a saucerful of violet edged with orange, and in ten or twenty seconds had the whole jungle of shavings in a blaze. But it was a violet blaze. It was not like ordinary fire. It was more like the thin blue waves that washed over the rocks of white asbestos in so many of our tenants' grates. And like a wave it passed over the surface of the floor, without eating into the wood.

There were no hangings in the room. The incendiary had relied entirely on his woodwork, and within a minute the floor was a sea of violet flames with red crests. There was one island. I had stooped after Nettleton left me for the last time, and swept the shavings clear of me on all sides, garnering as many as possible into the hole in the floor where the trap had been set, and drying the floor within reach as well as I could with the bare hand. There was this island, perhaps the size of a hearth-rug; and I cannot say that I was ever any hotter than I should

have been on such a rug before a roaring fire.

But this fire did not roar, though it surged over the rest of the floor in its blue billows and its red-hot crests, flowing under the carpenter's bench as the sea flows under a pier. And the floor was not on fire; the fire was on the floor; and it was dying down! It was dying down before my starting eyes. Where the violet wave receded, it left little more mark than the waves of the sea leave on the sands. It was only the fiery crests that lingered, and crackled, and turned black . and my senses left me before I saw the reason, or more than the first blinding ray of hope!

It was not Uvo Delavoye, and it was not Sarah, who was standing over me when I awoke to the physical agony on which that of the mind had acted lately as a perfect anodyne. It was the Delavoyes' doctor. Uvo had sent for him in the middle of the night, telling his poor people he felt much worse—having indeed a higher temperature—but being in reality only unbearably

anxious about Nettleton and me. He wanted to know what Nettleton was doing. He wanted to be sure that I was safe in my bed. If his sister had not been nursing him, he would have made a third madman by crawling out to satisfy himself; as it was, he had sent for the doctor and told him all. And the doctor had not only come himself, but had knocked up his partner on the way, as they were both tenants on the Estate.

They might have been utter strangers to me that night, and for a little time after Nor was it in accordance with their orders that I got to know things as soon as I did. That was where Uvo Delavoye did come in, and with him his mother's new cook, Sarah, in the bonnet with the nodding plume—just as she had been to see her pore old master.

"It's a beautiful mad-'ouse," said Sarah, with a moist twinkle in her funny old eye. "I only 'ope he won't want to burn it down!"

"*I* only hope you're keeping his effort to yourselves," said I. "It'll do the Estate no good, if it gets out, after all the other things that have been happening here."

"Trust us and the doctors!" said Uvo.

"We're all in the same boat, Gilly, and your old Muskett's the only other soul who knows. By the way"—his glance had deepened—"both they and Sarah think it must have been coming on for a long time."

"I'm quite sure it 'as," said Sarah, earnestly. "I never did 'ear such things as Mr. Nettleton used to say to me, or to hisself, it didn't seem to matter who it was. But of course it wasn't for me to go about repeating them."

I saw Uvo's mouth twitching, for some reason, and I changed the subject to the miraculous preservation of the house in Witching Hill Road. The doctors had assured me that the very floor, which my own eyes had beheld a sea of blazing spirit, was scarcely so much as charred. And Uvo Delavoye confirmed the statement.

"It wasn't such a deep sea as you thought, Gilly. But it was the spirit that saved the show, and that's just where our poor friend overshot the mark. Spirit burns itself, not the thing you put it on. It's like the brandy and the Christmas pudding. Those shavings would have been far more dangerous by themselves, but drenched in methylated

spirit they burnt like a wick, which of course hardly burns at all."

"*My* methylated!" Sarah chimed in. "He must have found it when he was looking for me all over my kitchens, pore gentleman, and me at my brother's all the time! I'd just took a gallon from Draytons' Stores, because you get it ever so much cheaper by the gallon, Mr. Hugo. I must remember to tell your ma."

CHAPTER VIII

The Temple of Bacchus

That spring I did what a great many young fellows were doing in those particular days I threw up my work at short notice, and went very far afield from Witching Hill. It was a long year before I came back, unscathed as to my skin, but with its contents ignobly depreciated and reduced, on a visit to 7, Mulcaster Park.

Uvo Delavoye met me at the station, and we fled before the leisurely tide of top-hats and evening papers, while one of the porters followed with my things. There were no changes that I could see, except in myself as I caught sight of myself in my old office window. The creepers might have made a modest stride on the Queen Anne houses; brick and tile were perhaps a mellower red; and more tenants appeared to be growing

better roses in their front gardens. But the place had always been at its best at the end of May: here was a giant's nosegay of apple-blossom, and there a glimpse of a horse-chestnut laden like a Christmas-tree with its cockades of pure cream. One felt the flight of time only at such homely spectacles as Shoolbred's van, delivering groceries at the house which Edgar Nettleton had tried to burn down with me in it. And an empty perambulator, over the way at Beryl-stow, confirmed the feeling when Delavoye informed me that the little caller was a remarkable blend of our old friend Guy Berridge and the whilom Miss Hemming.

Mulcaster Park had moved bodily with the times. It had its asphalt paths at last. Incidentally I missed some blinds which had been taken over as tenant's fixtures in my first or second year. The new ones were not red. The next house lower down had also changed hands; a very striking woman, in a garden hat, was filling a basket with roses from a William Allen Richardson which had turned the painted porch into a bower; and instead of answering a simple

question, Uvo stopped and called her to the gate.

"Let me introduce you to Mrs. Ricardo, Gilly," said he, as the lady joined us with a smile that set me thinking. "Mrs. Ricardo knows all about you, and was looking forward to seeing the conquering hero come marching home."

It was not one of Uvo's happiest speeches; but Mrs. Ricardo was neither embarrassed nor embarrassing in what she found to say to me. I liked her then and there: in any case I should have admired her. She was a tall and handsome brunette, with thick eyebrows and that high yet dusky colouring which reminds one in itself of stormlight and angry skies. But Mrs. Ricardo seemed the most good-natured of women, anxious at once not to bore me about my experiences, and yet to let us both see that she thoroughly appreciated their character.

"You will always be thankful that you went, Mr. Gillon, in spite of enteric," said Mrs. Ricardo. "The people to pity were those who couldn't go, but especially the

old soldiers, who would have given anything to have gone."

I had just flattered myself that she was about to give each of us a rose; she had certainly selected an obvious buttonhole, and appeared to be seeking its fellow in the basket, when suddenly I saw her looking past us both and up the road. A middle-aged man was hobbling towards us in the thinning stream of homing citizens. He did not look one of them; he wore light clothes and a straw hat which he did not remove in accosting my companions; and I thought that he looked both hot and cross as he leant hard upon a serviceable stick.

"Gossiping at the gate, as usual!" he cried, with a kind of rasping raillery. "Even Mr. Delavoye won't thank you for keeping him standing on this villainous asphalt till his feet sink in."

"That would have been one for you, Gilly, in the old days," said Uvo. "Captain Ricardo—Mr. Gillon."

Captain Ricardo also seemed to have heard of me. He overhauled me with his peevish little eyes, and then said two or three of the

bitterest things about the British forces, regular and irregular, that it ever was my lot to hear. I made no attempt to reply to them. His wife tried to present him with the rose which I fancied had been meant for one of us, and his prompt rejection of the offering only hardened me in that impression. Then Uvo asked him if he had seen good play at the Oval; and so the vitriolic stream was diverted into such congenial channels as the decadence of modern cricket and the calibre of the other members of the Surrey Club.

"But won't you come in?" concluded the captain in his most forbidding manner. "I hate this talking at the gate like a pack of servants, but my wife seems to have a mania for it."

It is only fair to state that Mrs. Ricardo had withdrawn during the denunciation of the game which her husband spent his useless days in watching, as Uvo told me when we had declined his inhospitality and were out of earshot. It was all he did say about Captain Ricardo, and I said nothing at all. The people were evidently friends of his; at least the wife was, and it was she who

had set me thinking with her first smile. I was still busy wondering whether, or where, I could have seen her before.

"It's quite possible," said Uvo, when I had wondered aloud. "I wouldn't give her away if it weren't an open secret here. But Witching Hill hasn't called on Mrs. Ricardo since it found out that she was once on the stage."

"Good Lord!"

"There's another reason, to give the neighbours their due. Ricardo has insulted most of them to their faces. A bit of gossip got about, and instead of ignoring it he limped out on the war-path, cutting half the Estate and damning the other half in heaps."

"But what was her stage name?"

Delavoye gave a grim laugh as he ushered me into the garden of many memories. "You wouldn't know it, Gilly. You were never a great playgoer, you see, and Mrs. Ricardo was anything but a great actress. But she's a very great good sort, as you'll find out for yourself when you know her better."

I could quite believe it even then—but I was not so sure after a day or two with Uvo. I found him leading a lonely life, with

Nettleton's old Sarah to look after him. Miss Delavoye had been wooed and married while my back was turned, and Mrs. Delavoye was on a long visit to the young couple. Uvo, however, appeared to be enjoying his solitude rather than otherwise; his health was better, he was plying his pen, things were being taken by all kinds of periodicals. And yet I was uneasy about him. Among many little changes, but more in this house than in most, the subtlest change of all was in Uvo Delavoye himself.

He could not do enough for me; from the few survivors of his father's best bins, to my breakfast served in bed by his own hands, nothing was good enough for the fraud he made me feel. Yet we were not in touch as we had been of old. I could have done with fewer deeds of unnecessary kindness and more words of unguarded intimacy. He did not trust me as he used. He had something or somebody on his mind; and I soon made up mine that it was Mrs. Ricardo, but not from anything else he told me. He never mentioned her name again. He did not tell me that, with a view to a third road,

the Estate had just purchased a fresh slice of the delightful woodland behind Mulcaster Park ; that in its depths was a little old ruin, just after his heart, and that this ruin was also a favourite haunt of Mrs. Ricardo's. I was left to make all these discoveries for myself, on a morning when Uvo Delavoye was expressly closeted at his desk.

It was, to be sure, my old Mr. Muskett who told me about the new land, and invited me to explore it at my pleasure. On a warm morning it seemed a better scheme than going alone upon the river, as Uvo had suggested. I accordingly turned back with Mr. Muskett, who went on to speak of the ruin, and in fact set me on my way to it while I was setting him to the station. Ten minutes later, in a tangle of bush and bracken, I had found it : an ancient wall, scaled with patches of mouldy stucco, and at one end an Ionic pillar towering out of the sea of greenery like a lighthouse clear of the cliffs. Obviously, as Mr. Muskett had said, the fragments that remained of one of those toy temples which were a characteristic conceit of old Georgian grounds. But it happened to be the first

that I had seen, and I proceeded to reconnoitre the position with some interest. Then it was that Mrs. Ricardo was discovered, seated on one of several stumps of similar pillars, on the far side of the wall.

Mrs. Ricardo, without her hat in the shadow of the old grey wall, but with her glossy hair and glowing colour stamped against it with rich effect: a charming picture in its greenwood frame, especially as she was looking up to greet me with a radiant smile. But I was too taken aback to be appreciative for the moment. And then I decided that the high colouring was a thought too high, and a sudden self-consciousness disappointing after her excellent composure in the much more trying circumstances of our previous meeting.

"Haven't you been here before, Mr. Gillon?" Mrs. Ricardo seemed surprised, but quite competent to play the guide. "This mossy heap's supposed to have been the roof, and these stone stumps the columns that held it up. There's just that one standing as it was. There should be a 'sylvan prospect' from where I'm sitting; but it

must have been choked up for years and years."

"You do know a lot about it!" I cried, recovering my admiration for the pretty woman as she recovered her self-possession. And then she smiled again, but not quite as I had caught her smiling.

"What Mr. Delavoye's friends don't know about Witching Hill oughtn't to be worth knowing!" said Mrs. Ricardo. "I mean what he really knows, not what he makes up, Mr. Gillon. I hear you don't believe in all that any more than I do. But he does seem to have read everything that was ever written about the place. He says this was certainly the Temple of Bacchus in the good old days."

"I don't quite see where Bacchus comes in," said I, thinking that Uvo and Mrs. Ricardo must be friends indeed.

"He's supposed to have been on this old wall behind us, in a fresco or something, by Villikins or somebody. You can see where it's been gouged out, and the stucco with it."

But I had to say what was in my mind. "Is Uvo Delavoye still harping on about

his bold bad ancestor, Mrs. Ricardo? Does he still call him his old man of the soil?"

To her, at any rate, yes, he did! She did not think it was a thing he talked about to everybody. But I had hoped it was an extinct folly, since he had not mentioned it as yet to me. It was almost as though Mrs. Ricardo had taken my old place. Did she discourage him as I had done? She told me it was his latest ambition to lay the ghost. And I marvelled at their intimacy, and wondered what that curmudgeon of a husband had to say to it!

Yet it seemed natural enough that we should talk about Uvo Delavoye, as I sat on another of the broken columns and lit a cigarette at Mrs. Ricardo's suggestion. Uvo was one of those people who are the first of bonds between their friends, a fruitful subject, a most human interest in common. So I found myself speaking of him in my turn, with all affection and yet some little freedom, to an almost complete stranger who was drawing me on more deliberately than I saw.

"You were great friends, Mr. Gillon, weren't you?"

"We *are*, and I hope we always shall be."

"It must have been everything for you to have such a friend in such a place!"

"It was so! I stayed on and on because of him. He was the life and soul of the Estate to me."

Mrs. Ricardo looked as though she could have taken the words out of my mouth. "But what a spoilt life, and what a strange soul!" said she, instead; and I saw there was something in Mrs. Ricardo, after all.

She was looking at me and yet through me, as we sat on our broken bits of Ionic columns. She had spoken in a dreamy voice, with a wonderful softening of her bold, flamboyant beauty; for I was not looking through her by any means, but staring harder than I had any business, in a fresh endeavour to remember where we had met before. And for once she had spoken without a certain intonation, which I had hardly noticed in her speech until I missed it now.

"Of course I've heard of all the extraordinary adventures you've both had here," resumed Uvo's new friend, as though to emphasise the terms that they were on.

"Not all of them?" I suggested. There were one or two affairs that he and I were to have kept to ourselves.

"Why not?" she flashed, suspiciously.

"Oh! I don't know."

"Which of them is such a secret?"

She was smiling now, but with obvious effort. Why this pressure on a pointless point? And where *had* I seen her before?

"Well, there was our very first adventure, for one," said I.

"Underground, you mean?"

"Yes—partly."

I could not help staring now. Mrs. Ricardo had reddened so inexplicably.

"There was no need to tell me the other part!" she said, scornfully. "I was in it—as you know very well!"

Then I did know. She was the bedizened beauty who had raked in the five-pound notes, and smashed a magnum of champagne in her excitement, at the orgy in Sir Christopher Stainsby's billiard room.

"I know it now," I stammered, "but I give you my word——"

"Fiddle!" she interrupted. "You've

known it all the time. I've seen it in your face. He gave me away to you, and I shan't forgive him ! "

I found myself involved in a heated exposition of the facts. I had never recognised her until that very minute. But I had kept wondering where we had met before. And that was all that she could have seen in my face. As for Uvo Delavoye, when I had spoken to him about it, he had merely assured me that I must have seen her on the stage : so far and no further had he given her away. Mrs. Ricardo took some assuring and reassuring on the point. But the truth was in me, and in her ultimate pacification she seemed to lose sight of the fact that she herself had done what she accused Uvo of doing. Evidently the leakage of her secret mattered far less to Mrs. Ricardo than the horrible thought that Mr. Delavoye had let it out.

Of course I spoke as though there was nothing to matter in the least to anybody, and asked after Sir Christopher as if the entertainment in his billiard room had been one of the most conventional. It seemed

that he had married again in his old age ; he had married one of the other ladies of those very revels.

" That's really why I first thought of coming here to live," explained Mrs. Ricardo, with her fine candour. " But there have been all kinds of disagreeables."

She had known about the tunnel before she had heard of it from Uvo ; some member of the lively household had discovered its existence, and there had been high jinks down there on more than one occasion. But Lady Stainsby had not been the same person since her marriage. I gathered that she had put her reformed foot down on the underground orgies, but that Captain Ricardo had done his part in the subsequent disagreeables. It further appeared that the blood-stained lace and the diamond buckle had also been discovered, and that old Sir Christopher had " behaved just like he would, and froze on to both without a word to Mr. Delavoye's grand relations."

I suggested that mining rights might have gone with the freehold, but Mrs. Ricardo quoted Uvo's opinion as to what still ailed

Sir Christopher Stainsby. She made it quite clear to me that our friend, at any rate, still laboured under his old obsession, and that she herself took it more seriously than she had professed before one confidence led to another.

"But don't you tell him I told you!" she added as though we were ourselves old friends. "The less you tell Mr. Delavoye of all we've been talking about, the better turn you'll be doing me, Mr. Gillon. It was just like him not to give away ancient history even to you, and I don't think you're the one to tell him how I went and did it myself!"

I could have wished that she had taken that for granted; but at least she felt too finely to bind me down to silence. Altogether I found her a fine creature, certainly in face and form, and almost certainly at heart, if one guessed even charitably at her past, and then at her life in a hostile suburb with a neglectful churl of a husband.

But to admire the woman for her own sake was not to approve of her on all other grounds; and during our friendly and almost fascinating chat I contracted a fairly

definite fear that was not removed by the manner of its conclusion. Mrs. Ricardo had looked at a watch pinned to a pretty but audacious blouse, and had risen rather hurriedly. But she had looked at her watch just a minute too late; as we turned the corner of the ruin, there was Delavoye hurrying through the brake towards us; and though he was far enough off to conceal such confusion as Mrs. Ricardo had shown at my appearance on the scene, and to come up saying that he had found me at last, I could not but remember how he had shut himself up for the morning, after advising me to go on the river.

I was uneasy about them both; but it was impossible to say a word to anybody. He never spoke of her; that was another bad sign to my suspicious mind. It was entirely from her that I had drawn my material for suspicion, or rather for anxiety. I did not for a moment suppose that there was anything more than a possibly injudicious friendship between them; it was just the possibilities that stirred my sluggish imagination; and I should not have thought twice about

these but for Uvo's marked reserve in speaking of the one other person with whom I now knew that he was extremely unreserved. If only I had known it from him, I should not have deplored the mere detail that Mrs. Ricardo was in one way filling my own old place in his life.

My visit drew to an end ; on the last night I simply had to dine in town with a wounded friend from the front. It would have been cruel to get out of it, though Uvo almost tempted me by his keenness that I should go. I warned him, however, that I should come back early. And I was even earlier than my word. And Uvo was not in.

" He's gone out with his pipe," said Sarah, looking gratuitously concerned. " I'm sure I don't know where you'll find him." But this sounded like an afterthought; and there was a something shifty and yet wistful in the old body's manner that inclined me to a little talk with her about the master.

" You don't think he's just gone into the wood, do you, Sarah ? "

" Well, he do go there a good deal," said

Sarah. "Of course he don't always go that way; but he do go there."

"Might he have gone into Captain Ricardo's, Sarah?"

"He might," said Sarah, with more than dubious emphasis.

"They're his great friends now, aren't they?" I hazarded.

"Not Captain Ricardo, sir," said Sarah. "I've only seen him in the 'ouse but once, and that was when Miss Hamy was married; but we 'ad all sorts then." And Sarah looked as though the highways and hedges had been scoured for guests.

"But do you see much more of Mrs. Ricardo, Sarah?"

"I don't, sir, but Mr. Hugo do," said Sarah, for once off her loyal guard. "He sees more of her than his ma would like."

"Come, come, Sarah! She's a charming lady, and quite the belle of the Estate."

"That may be, sir, but the Estate ain't what it was," declared Sarah, with pregnant superiority. "There's some queer people come since I was with pore Mr. Nettleton."

"What about Mr. Nettleton himself, Sarah?"

"Mr. Nettleton was always a gentleman, sir, though he did try to set fire to the 'ouse with my methylated."

I left the old dame bobbing in the doorway, and went to look for Uvo in the wood. I swear I had no thought of spying upon him. What could there be to spy upon, at half-past nine at night, with Captain Ricardo safe and grumbling at his own fireside? I had been wasting my last evening at a club and in the train, and I did not want to miss another minute of Uvo Delavoye's society.

It was an exquisite night, the year near its zenith and the moon only less than full. The wood was changed from a beautiful bright picture into a beautiful black photograph; twig and leaf, and silent birds, stood out like motes in the moonbeams. But there were fine intervals of utter darkness, wide pools and high cascades of pitch, with never a bubble in the way of detail. And there was one bird to be heard, giving its own glory to the glorious night. But I

was not long alive to the heavenly song, or to the beauty of the moonlit wood.

I had entered by way of a spare site a little higher up than the Delavoyes', who, unlike some of their newer neighbours, had not a garden gate into the wood. I had penetrated some score yards into the pitch and silver of leafy tree and open space when I became aware that someone else had entered still higher up, and that our courses were converging. I thought for a moment that it might be Uvo ; but there was something halt yet stealthy about the unseen advance, as of a shackled man escaping ; and I knew who it was before I myself stole and dodged to get a sight of him. It was Captain Ricardo, creeping clumsily, often pausing to lean hard upon his tremendous stick. At first I thought he had two sticks ; but the other was not one ; the other was a hunting crop, for I saw the lash unloosed in one of the pauses, and a tree-trunk flicked again and again, about the height of a man's shoulder, as if for practice.

When the limping, cringing figure again proceeded on its way, the big stick was in

the left hand, the crop in the right, and I was a second sneak following the first, in the direction of the Temple of Bacchus.

I saw him stop and listen before I heard the voices. I saw the crop raised high in the moonlight, as if in the taking of some silent vow, and I lessened the distance between us with impunity, for he had never once looked round. And now I too heard the voices; they were on the other side of the temple wall; and this side was laved with moonlight, so that the edges of the crumbling stucco made seams of pitch, and Ricardo's shadow crouched upon the wall for a little age before his bent person showed against it.

Now he was at one end of the wall, peeping round, listening, instead of showing himself like a man. My blood froze at his miserable tactics. I had seen men keep cover under heavy fire with less precaution than this wretch showed in spying on his guilty wife; yet there was I copying him, even as I had dogged him through the wood. Now he had wedged himself in the heavy shadow between the wall and the one whole

pillar at right angles to the wall; now he was looking as well as listening. And now I was in his old place, now I was at his very elbow, eavesdropping myself in my watch and ward over the other eavesdropper.

The big stick leant against the end of the wall, just between us, nearer to my hand than his. The man himself leant hard against the pillar, the crop grasped behind him in both hands, its lash dangling like the tail of a monster rat. Those two clasped hands were the only part of him in the moonlight, and I watched them as I would have watched his eyes if we had been face to face. They were lean, distorted, twitching, itching hands. The lash was wound round one of them; there might have been more whipcord under the skin.

Meanwhile I too was listening perforce to the voices on the other side of the wall. I thought one came from the stone stump where Mrs. Ricardo had sat the other day, that she was sitting there again. The other voice came from various places. And to me the picture of Uvo Delavoye, tramping up and down in the moonlight as he talked, was as

plain as though there had been no old wall between us.

" I know you have a thin time of it. But so has he ! "

That was almost the first thing I heard. It made an immediate difference in my feeling towards the other eavesdropper. But I still watched his hands.

" Sitting on top of a cricket pavilion," said the other voice, " all day long ! "

" It takes him out of himself. You must see that he is eating his heart out, with this war still on, and fellows like Gillon bringing it home to him every day."

" I don't see anything. He doesn't give me much chance. If it isn't cricket at the Oval, it's billiards here at the George, night after night until I'm sick to death of the whole thing."

" Are you sure he's there now ? "

" Oh, goodness, yes ! He made no bones about it."

I thought Uvo had stopped in his stride to ask the question. I knew those hands clutched the hunting crop tighter at the answer. I saw the knuckles whiten in the moonlight.

"Because we're taking a bit of a risk," resumed Uvo, finishing further off than he began.

"Oh, no, we're not. Besides, what does it matter? I simply had to speak to you—and you know what happened the other morning. Mornings are the worst of all for people seeing you."

"But not for what they think of seeing you."

"Oh! what do I care what they think?" cried the wife of the man beside me. "I'm far past that. It's you men who keep on thinking and thinking of what other people are going to think!"

"We sometimes have to think for two," said Uvo—just a little less steadily, to my ear.

"You don't see that I'm absolutely desperate, mewed up with a man who doesn't care a rap for me!"

"I should make him care."

"That shows all *you* care!" she retorted, passionately.

And then I felt that he was standing over her; there was something in the altered pose of the head near mine, something that took

my eyes from the moonlit hands, and again gave me as vivid a picture as though the wall were down.

"It's no use going back on all that," said Uvo, and it was harder to hear him now. "I don't want to say rotten things. You know well enough what I feel. If I felt a bit less, it would be different. It's just because we've been the kind of pals we have been . . . my dear . . . my dear! . . that we mustn't go and spoil it now."

The low voice trembled, but now hers was lower still, and I at least lost most of her answer . . . "if you really cared for me . . . to take me away from a man who never did!" That much I heard, and this: "But you're no better! You don't know what it is to—care!"

That brought an outburst, but not from the man beside me. He might have been turned into part of the Ionic pillar. It was Uvo who talked, and I for one who listened without another thought of the infamy of listening. I was not there to listen to anybody, but to keep an eye on Ricardo; my further action depended on his; but from the

first his presence had blunted my own sense of our joint dishonour, and now the sense was simply dead. I was there with the best motives. I had even begun listening with the best motives, as it were with a watching brief for the unhappy pair. But I forgot both my behaviour and its excuse while Uvo Delavoye was delivering his fine soul; for fine it was, with one great twist in it that came out even now, when I least expected it, and to the last conceivable intent. It is the one part of all he said that I do not blush to have overheard.

"Let us help each other; for God's sake don't let us drag each other down! That's not quite what I mean. I know it sounds rotten. I wonder if I dare tell you what I do mean? It's not we who would do the dragging, don't you see? You know who it is, who's pulling at us both like the very devil that he was in life!"

Uvo laughed shortly, and now his tone was a tone I knew too well. "Nobody has stood up to him yet," he went on; "it's about time somebody did. Surely you and I can put up a bit of a fight between us? Surely we aren't

such ninepins as old Stainsby, Abercromby Royle, Guy Berridge and all that lot ? "

In the pause I figured her looking at him, as I had so often done when a civil answer was impossible. But Mrs. Ricardo asked another question instead.

" Is that your notion of laying the ghost ? "

" Yes ! " he said earnestly. " There's something not to be explained in all the things that have happened since I've been here. To be absolutely honest, I haven't always really and truly believed in all my own explanations. I'm not sure that Gilly himself—that unbelieving dog—didn't get nearer the mark on the night he was nearly burned to death. But, if it's my own ghost, all the more reason to lay it ; and, if it isn't, those other poor brutes were helpless in their ignorance, but I haven't their excuse ! "

" I believe every word of it," said the poor soul with a sob. " When we came here I thought we should be—well, happy enough in our way. But we haven't had a day's happiness. You, you have given me the only happiness I've ever had here, and now . . . ."

" No ; it's been the other way about,"

interrupted Uvo, sadly. "But that's all over. I'm going to clear out, and you'll find things far happier when I'm gone. It's I who have been the curse to you—to both of you—if not to all the rest . . . ."

His voice failed him; but there was no mistaking its fast resolve. Its very tenderness was not more unmistakable, to me, than the fixity of a resolution which my whole heart and soul applauded. And suddenly I was flattering myself that the man by my side shared my intuitive confidence and approval. He was no longer a man of stone; he had come to life again. Those hands of his were not fiercely frozen to the crop, but turning it gently round and round. Then they stopped. Then they moved with the man's whole body. He was looking the other way, almost in the direction by which he and I had approached the temple. And as I looked, too, there were footsteps in the grass, Mrs. Ricardo passed close by us with downcast eyes, and so back into the wood, with Uvo at arm's length on the far side.

Then it was that I found myself mistaken in Ricardo. He had not taken his eyes off

the retreating pair. He was crouching to follow them, only waiting till they were at a safe distance. I also waited—till they disappeared—then I touched him on the shoulder.

He jumped up, gasping. I had my finger before my lips.

"Can't you trust them now?" I whispered.

"Spying!" he hissed when he could find his tongue.

"What about you, Captain Ricardo?"

"It was my wife."

"Well, it was my friend and you're his enemy. And his enemy was armed to the teeth," I added, handing him the big stick that he had left leaning against the wall.

"That wasn't for him. This was," muttered Ricardo, lapping the lash round his crop. "I was going to horsewhip him within an inch of his life. And now that you know all about it, too, I've a damned good mind to do it still!"

"There are several reasons why you won't," I assured him.

"You're his bully, are you?" he snarled.

"I'm whatever you choose to make me, Captain Ricardo. Already you've consoled

me for doing a thing I never dreamt of doing in my life before."

"But, good God! I never dreamt of listening either. I was prepared for a very different scene. And then—and then I thought perhaps I'd better not make one after all! I thought it would only make things worse. Things might have been worse still, don't you see?"

"Exactly. I think you behaved splendidly, all the same."

"But if you heard the whole thing——"

"I couldn't help myself. I found myself following you by pure chance. Then I saw what you had in your hand."

With a common instinct for cover, we had drifted round to the other side of the wall. And neither of us had raised his voice. But Ricardo never had his eyes off me, as we played our tiny scene among the broken columns, where Uvo and Mrs. Ricardo had just played theirs.

"Well, are you going to hold your tongue?" he asked me.

"If you hold yours," I answered.

"I mean—even as between you two!"

"That's just what I mean, Ricardo. If neither of us know what's happened, nothing else need happen. 'Least said,' you know."

"Nothing whatever must be said. I'll trust you never to tell Delavoye, and, if it makes you happier, you can trust me to say nothing to—to anybody. It's my only chance," said Ricardo, hoarsely. "I've not been all I might have been. I see it now. But perhaps . . . it isn't . . . too late. . ."

And suddenly he seized me violently by the hand. Then I found myself alone in the shadow of the wall which had once borne a fresco by Nollikins, and I stood like a man awakened from a dream. In the flattering moonlight, the sham survivals of the other century might have been thousands of years old, their suburban setting some sylvan corner of the Roman campagna. . . Then once more I heard the nightingale, and it sang me back into contemporary realities. I wondered if it had been singing all the time. I had not heard less of it during the hour that Uvo and I had spent underneath this very wood, four summers ago!

That was on the first night of our life at

Witching Hill, and this was to be our last. I arranged it beautifully when I got in and had tried to explain how entirely I had lost my bearings in the wood. I told Uvo, and it happened to be true, that I had been wondering why on earth he would not come up north with me next day. And before midnight he had packed.

Then we sat up together for the last time in that back room of his on the first floor, and watched the moon set in the tree-tops, and silver leaves twinkle as the wood sighed in its sleep. One more pipe, and the black sky was turning grey. A few more pipes, much talk about old times, and the wood was a wood once more; its tossing crests were tipped with emeralds in the flashing sun; and as tree after tree broke into a merry din, we spoke of joy-bells taken up by steeple after steeple, and Uvo read me eight lines that he had discovered somewhere while I was away.

"Some cry up Gunnersbury,
For Sion some declare,
And some say that with Chiswick House
No villa can compare;

But ask the beaux of Middlesex,
Who know the country well,
If Witching Hill—if Witching Hill—
Don't bear away the bell."

"I hope you agree, Beau Gillon?" said Uvo, with the old wilful smile. "By the way, I haven't mentioned him since you've been back, but on a last morning like this you may be glad to hear that my old ghost of the soi. is laid at last. . . The rest is silence, if you don't mind, old man."

THE END

Wyman & Sons Ltd., Printers, London and Reading.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY
Los Angeles
This book is DUE on the last date stamped below.

QL OCT 0 1 1990

3 1158 01135 4957